

## Pastor Jon's 2022 Ash Wednesday Sermon

**Text: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**

In our first reading, the Prophet Joel calls the people to enter into a time of community lament. This text reads us today... calling us into a time of community lament... especially over the unprovoked war in Ukraine.

<sup>1</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
    for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—  
<sup>2</sup>a day of darkness and gloom,  
    a day of clouds and thick darkness!

What is the day of the Lord? At it's lowest common denominator, the day of the Lord is a day of ultimate judgment that many associate with the end of the world. But in Joel there is a thread of hope that some will survive the day of the Lord and God will relent.

The reason for the community lament in Joel was an unparalleled locust plague leading to the devastation of crops and livestock in chapter 1 (Joel 1:4-7, 11-12, 17-18). The people thought the world was ending. But notice that Joel does not blame the people for their own suffering and does not claim that natural catastrophes are divine punishment.

Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
    a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
    nor will be again after them  
    in ages to come.

The language of an army of locusts recalls for me the image of the Russian convoy heading toward Kyiv Ukraine. I hope this image of an army rolling into free country without cause never happens again.

<sup>12</sup>Yet even now, says the LORD,  
    return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
<sup>13</sup>rend your hearts and not your clothing.

Here is the crux of our journey in Lent... to return to the Lord with all our heart. Not just some of our heart... but all our heart. This is hard. This involves the disciplines of Lent. Fasting, prayer, confession, alms giving (or giving to the poor). Today, we confessed together a whole catalogue of our sins. We should be cut to the heart. One thing that comes to mind is all this talk about oil and gas and gas prices. We are utterly dependent on oil both local and foreign oil. Just because barrels of oil are released from the strategic oil reserves won't change our habits. It will just be a death by a thousand cuts. We need to make a wholesale life change that is less dependent on oil. Psalm 51 says that true repentance involves a broken and contrite heart over what we have done and left undone. And to turn around... make a change. Is the pain great enough for us to change our dependence on oil? Probably not. The cars we drive, the plastics we consume, and fertilizer used all use oil. What will cause us to change? The climate? Outrageous heating bills?

I will try to do my part. I just ordered a new bike. I will try to lower my carbon footprint by riding my bike to work. However, the bike is on backorder. I hope to be known as your biking pastor.

Repentance for Joel doesn't include outward displays of piety like wearing sackcloth or ripped clothing. People would wear certain clothing and dishevel their hair so others could see them fasting.

Return to the LORD, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.

Joel has hope that a gracious God will relent from punishing.

And in fact, if you keep reading in Joel, God does relent. Food is restored and there is a promise that God's Spirit will be poured out on all people.

What do you have a broken heart over? What have you done and left undone that you want to change? What do you need to fast from? Do something during Lent that has meaning for you and the world around us.

Amen