

“Yet Even Now...” (17 Feb 21)

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Based on material from Discipleship Ministries

We stand this day on the eve of Lent, that season in the church year that many of us would just as soon skip.

- This season, which we associate with giving up chocolate or some other goodie for seven weeks, is just not our bag.
- This season, part of which is about reflecting on our own sin, is uncomfortable—after all, who wants to think about their own shortcomings?

Can't we just skip the whole Lent thing; why not just make it go away, change the channel, take a vacation from Lent for year...or forever? Besides, the pandemic has just imposed on us a year's worth of denial and deprivation. As someone said last year, we've been through the “lentiest Lent that has ever lented.”¹ Haven't we had enough of Lent?

Maybe so. But skipping out on Lent would be to miss an opportunity to receive God's grace, to miss renewing our relationship with God. This is the other part of Lent that we have to keep in sight as we journey throughout these forty some odd days to Easter. God offers us this time to receive God's grace; to repent from our sin; to stop our straying; and, to turn back to God.

In the reading for today, the prophet Joel outlines for us both the judgment of God and the grace of God. As so often happened in the history of Israel, the people had gone astray from the ways of the Lord. They had broken the covenant God made with them. Joel sounds the alarm:

- A trumpet sounds, the warning goes out, the Day of the Lord is at hand! The people expected this day, a day wherein they thought they would be vindicated. Israel, the least of nations yet beloved by the God of the universe, would be rescued from its enemies. All the bullying nations around them would be punished for oppressing God's people. And the people would rejoice because God was coming to save them.
- Not so! The day of the Lord is described as a day of “darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!” It is Judgment Day. The people have strayed from God. Now, God is coming to pass judgment on Israel. Instead of vindication, it is the end. For who can stand in the judgment of the Lord God?

Who indeed?

But even in the finality of judgment, Joel holds out hope. “Yet even now...” These words stand from the words of destruction and gloom.

“Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing” (Joel 2:12).

Israel had a history of breaking God's covenant. One United Methodist theologian described the history of Israel as one of “covenant making and covenant breaking.” Israel was a cyclical, repeat offender when it came to breaking God's law. Israel was so used to making amends with the Almighty that they had the process of repentance down pat: fast; pray; weep; grieve; tear your clothing (a sign of grief when someone died or to recognize sin, which was a breaking of the relationship with God, a kind of death).

¹ “Yet Even Now, Fend Your Hearts: Claiming the Promise,” Discipleship Ministries.org, article on internet, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/rend-your-hearts-claiming-the-promise/ash-wednesday-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes>, accessed 3 Feb 2021.

As a nation, Israel had good form when it came to repenting because they had done it so many times. But their form of repentance had triumphed over the function, which was to get back into right relationship with God. What was needed to repent? Something deeper, something more real.

“Rend your hearts and not your garments,” exclaimed Joel. “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 2:13-14).

In other words:

“You need to repent. Turn around. Do it now! Don’t just go through the motions like you’ve done in the past. Mean it, this time. Deep down, in the heart. That’s where repentance counts. Make your repentance real. Go the distance this time. Turn back to God. When you do this, and you mean it, God will receive you back because that is the nature of God.”

God’s call to real repentance through the prophet Joel is the call of Lent.

In these weeks that lie before us, we do take time to acknowledge our sin.

- We recognize we have strayed from God’s path.
- And we regret our disobedience to God’s way that leads to life.



In doing this, and meaning it, we become recipients of the grace that flows from the throne of God.

God’s grace flows to us as individuals, yes; but, more importantly, it flows to us as the community of God’s people.

“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation...” (Joel 2:15-16).

The well of grace is deep. And like any well set up in the community, it is for all the people, not

just one or two. Jesus, who died on the Cross in obedience to God and for our sake, is our source of grace; the blood that flowed from his thorn-crowned head and his spear-pierced side, is our well of grace.

I quoted a hymn in a recent sermon and I’ll quote it again because, after all, when the song fits, sing it:

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
O precious is the flow,
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know;
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.²

Our call to Lent this year is a call to deep and heartfelt repentance. The goal is to bring us back to right relationship with God. There are no exceptions or excuses; we are all called to gather and to rend our hearts before the Lord. May God give us the strength to do so, and the grace to receive the forgiveness that comes through the mercies of Jesus Christ. Amen.

² Robert Lowry, “Nothing but the blood of Jesus,” Hymnary.org, article on internet, https://hymnary.org/text/what_can_wash_away_my_sin, accessed 9 Feb 21.

