

Joel 2:12-19 + Turn to the Lord Your God + Series: Turn to the Lord
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + Ash Wednesday + 14 February 2018

Today is a strange conjunction of holidays, isn't it? On the one hand, February 14 is Valentine's Day—a day that's become something of a Hallmark holiday over the years. There are lots of hearts and valentines and cards and chocolates and red and pink and white. Florists make a killing today since everyone wants to buy roses, while restaurants are full with big crowds. Even Dunkin' Donuts has heart-shaped donuts today! Our kids would say today is a "mushy-mushy" day, even as they themselves enjoy little treats from mom and dad or grandma and grandpa. It's supposed to be a holiday celebrating love between couples and families.

February 14 also happens to be Ash Wednesday this particular year—first time since 1945. Ash Wednesday kicks off the church season of Lent—40 days that focus on repentance and preparation for Easter. Rather than red and pink, you see black and gray. Rather than great sounds of joy, you hear muted sounds of grief over sin. Tonight we are reminded of our mortality, that we are dust and ashes before God made even worse because of our sins against his holy Law. We are called to turn from our sins to the Lord in repentance. Since the early centuries of the Christian church, on this day many Christians have received a cross of ash marked on their foreheads by the pastor with words we heard earlier, ***"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."***

When you think about it, you might have trouble finding two other holidays that are more polar opposite than Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday. Some have even wondered if Christians can actually celebrate Valentine's Day today because it is Ash Wednesday. If you take a closer look at the words of the Old Testament prophet Joel before us—words calling God's people to repent, you might think that Ash Wednesday has nothing to do with love, but like a child's paper valentine, we need to look closer to see what's on the inside. In doing so, we'll understand why the prophet urges us to **TURN TO THE LORD YOUR GOD!**

There was trouble coming. The Lord had given his prophet Joel a terrifying vision of destruction coming for the people of Israel. He saw a vast swarm of locusts with wave upon wave of locusts like an army destroying the crops and everything in their path. They foreshadowed a very real, human army bringing destruction everywhere they went on everyone they encountered.

What made the vision even more terrifying was this statement, ***"The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?"*** (Joel 2:11) God himself would lead the charge and wipe out the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. For many years they had rejected the true God in spite of his faithfulness. They had rejected his Word in spite of its effective power. They had rejected and even killed his prophets. Judgment was coming. What would they do? Where could they turn?

On a day like today, you wouldn't expect to receive a kind, loving, or friendly valentine from your worst enemy. If anything, you would expect something rude or snarky or hurtful. As the people of Israel looked down the barrel of God's holy judgment pointed right at them for their wickedness, you wouldn't expect God to give them a way out. You wouldn't expect a message of love to come from God who had every right to be angry and hostile towards them, but what does the Lord tell them? ***"Even now...return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."***

Was he giving them an easy way out? Was he being cruel? You might think he sounds a little like a playground bully promising to be nice if they just cry uncle or if they make an outward show of being sorry. Yet the Lord urges through his prophet, ***"Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love, and he relents from sending disaster. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing..."***

So what was God saying? He wasn't giving them an easy way out or bullying them into showing sorrow. No, he was telling them, "Turn away from your sins! Stop going back to them! Stop wallowing in your wickedness! Turn from your sin and turn back to the Lord your God, who loves you, who doesn't want to rain down disaster and destruction on your head, who doesn't want to send you to the depths of hell for all eternity. He wants you to live and live with him forever!" God isn't speaking with heartless cruelty, but with a heart full of love for his people in spite of their sins, in spite of their faithlessness, in spite of the holy and eternal judgment they all deserve.

The Lord of grace wanted his people to stop chasing after other gods, other things, other people, other love, and in faith, turn back to him and his love. Like knowing that a car accident is about to happen unless the drivers turn

away, God knew what trouble was coming for his people if they did not turn back to him. So he called them to repent, to turn back to the Lord their God.

The prophet urged them, ***“Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance a disgrace, an object of scorn among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”***

Now the ancient Israelites were in many ways just like us. They knew what sorrow and grief and repentance was supposed to look like. They tore their garments. They put rough sackcloth material on, sat on the ground, and poured ashes and dust on their heads. They wailed and wept and even hired professional mourners make their grief clear.

...But the Lord didn't want an outward show. He wanted real repentance. Rather than tear their garments, he wanted their stubborn, rock hard hearts to break. Rather than leave the mourning to the professionals, he wanted everyone to mourn over their sins and live. From the nursing infant to the energetic child to the bridal couple in full bloom to the aged elderly, the Lord wanted every one of them to turn back to him, to fast and weep and mourn not because he told them to, but because they were sincerely sorry for their sins against him. He wanted them to genuinely call on his mercy and his promises.

When they did, how did he respond? Joel tells us, ***“Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people.”*** God would rise up and fight for them. He would support their cause. Not only would he take pity and relent, but he would even bless his people with grace upon grace, satisfying their needs with blessings for every aspect of their lives, especially reconciliation with him. In mercy and love, he would save them from their sin and destruction.

That brings us back to today. Yes, it's Valentine's Day, but it's still Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday and Lent force us to look at the dark, ashen reality of sin in our lives. Far too often we've been the Pharisee telling God how great we are rather than the tax collector recognizing our sin. Far too often we've been like David deserving the condemning finger of the prophet pointed at us because far too often we've failed in our God-given callings as husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, neighbors and citizens and Christians. Yet repentance doesn't come easy.

Repentance doesn't come naturally to us. You're not supposed to be sorry for what you do or the choices you make or who you think you are. You're supposed to embrace them. Repentance goes against our cultural grain unless I'm saying sorry for triggering a reaction or doing what our culture considers offensive or even being what Christ has called me to be. Often repentance is nothing more than a show, like it was for the ancient Israelites, as we show how "sorry" we are for what we may have done, while never addressing the evil or the guilt or the impenitence we harbor in our hearts.

Then the Lord calls us to turn, to ***“rend your heart and not your garments,”*** to not just shed tears, but genuinely grieve for your sins against God. He doesn't want you to look for relief in yourself. He doesn't just want you to admit that you live a sin-ravaged life. He wants you to turn from your sins and live, to turn away from other loves and turn to him and his love for you.

You see, the Lord in his free and faithful love calls you with the winsome voice of the searching Shepherd, who calls you to turn back to him, to return to him. Why? Because ***“he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love, and he relents from sending disaster.”***

He calls you to turn back to him because of what he accomplished for you on the cross and in the empty tomb. He calls you to turn back to your Lord who blesses you with satisfying grace, who covers your guilt with forgiveness, your grief with comfort, and your disgrace with deliverance. Perhaps the Lord will spare you...and for Christ's sake he does. He declares your sins forgiven in the Savior who bore the full burden of your sins and mine that we might be declared righteous in God's sight. In love, he hears our cries for mercy and turns us back to him, moving us to rejoice even on Ash Wednesday.

Today is a strange day of joy and sorrow, of love and ashes, but in our God, our Lord of grace, we find the answer to our sorrow and mortality. That's why the black mark of ashes on believer's foreheads is in the shape of a cross. There on the cross God took up our guilt, our sorrow, our death, and demonstrated what true love really is. The Apostle John said it best, ***“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent***

his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10) Dear friends, this Lent we turn to the Lord our God. Amen.