

With All Your Heart
“Return to Me”
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Ash Wednesday Message
March 6, 2019

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 (NRSV)

2 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—

2 a day of darkness and gloom,

 a day of clouds and thick darkness!

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.

12 Yet even now, says the LORD,

 return to me with all your heart,

with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

13 rend your hearts and not your clothing.

Return to the LORD, your God,

 for he is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,

 and relents from punishing.

14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,

 and leave a blessing behind him,

a grain offering and a drink offering

 for the LORD, your God?

15 Blow the trumpet in Zion;

 sanctify a fast;

call a solemn assembly;

16 gather the people.

Sanctify the congregation;

 assemble the aged;

gather the children,

 even infants at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,

 and the bride her canopy.

17 Between the vestibule and the altar

 let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.

Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD,

and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'"

We, the people of God are stepping across a threshold tonight. The season of Lent is a good time to leave behind the things that cause DISharmony in our lives and pass through the door that God ALWAYS has open for us.

We step across the threshold of that open door and receive an ever new, joyful and hope-filled life *in* Christ that has always and WILL always provide.

It's in this season that we're given time to pay special attention to *anything* that deters us or detours us or even corrodes our believing hearts.

You heard Ann read the verses from Joel – but tonight let's focus on, most especially, verse 12 that says, "*Return to me with all your heart.*"

Thank Goodness for that verse!

The preceding verses (which we didn't hear tonight) are very "gloom and doom"; of destruction and grief! There are combat images with horses and chariots and fire and an army is trained and determined and unstoppable.

And *humanity* is paralyzed.

And then, Joel writes, "Yet, even now, says the Lord, *return to me with all your heart.*"

And we can let out our breath.

The people were being called to return to God with the all their hearts...Joel's way of reminding everyone of the Deuteronomy verse that they WOULD be familiar with: (Dt. 6:5) "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*"

Can you hear Joel calling to us?

Just the last few weeks have given us times when we want to throw up our hands in disgust – not just for the plans brought TO General Conference but the behavior of destruction, from both sides, AT General Conference and even after!

It goes without saying that we are subject to numerous temptations...

...to protest...

...to leave the UMC...

...to give up on what we believe.

And JUST THOSE THINGS are temptations that aren't in our every day lives.

We have A LOT of temptations.

We all have difficulties we have to face.

And sometimes, when we're facing difficulties – even in every day “stuff” – there are voices and movements that TRY to take advantage of our pain and uncertainty; trying to sow seeds of distrust.

Mother Teresa used to say “that the fruit of distrust is apathy.”

We could get paralyzed, like the ancient Israelites, become apathetic.

Or Dear Ones, we can deliberately, especially during Lent, deliberately “return to God.”

As my dad often says, “Call a spade and spade” and wasn't talking about a gardening tool!

It's calling the temptation or detours or *noise of the world* for what it is...to add another expression: “stop beating around the bush” and truthfully, even to the point of bluntness, name it! EVEN IF the subject is unpleasant.

(I took out other adjectives. I think you get what I mean.)

Church-y terms for Lent are to be in prayer, to practice self-denial, to repent...or turn away from...but let's be practical. The pressure of those words sometimes sets us up (at least me) for failure. Do it if it works for you. But, instead, this Lent, (and I think many of you will agree) let's deliberately unmask our temptations,

peel off the layers, and allow our hearts to beat in rhythm with the vibrant heart of God.

RETURN TO ME – God is making the offer! Return to Me with all your heart.

The whole of the Lenten season is a really good time to pause....

- And leave behind the commotion of the world that fills our souls with unrest, bitterness even, which, *if we're honest*, never get us anywhere.
- Pause from the urges to keep up a fast-paced life that (as Judge Judy says) causes us “kerfuffles” with our families and friends that detracts of our time with them AND, if we're really honest, time with God.
- Pause for a little while from needing to have so much affirmation from others to rest in our God-created worth.
- Pause for a little while to refrain from snooty looks and snarky comments – those times when we forget tenderness and Jesus encounters – especially those who are vulnerable; more especially those who are weighed down by sin (yep, spade's a spade.)

Pause, Dear Ones – and *return to God with all your heart*.

- Let's pause from our urges to want (or need) to control everything – so that we don't overlook gratitude for the blessings in our lives
- Pause for a little while from the deafening noises that draws us into “conforming” with the world instead of God's perfect and good will. Our unproductive thoughts can lead us to self-pity when God has put good things and good *people* in our way to help share burdens.
- Return to God with a pause that separates us from the emptiness of instantaneous or momentary that deprives us of a real foundation, roots if you will, in Scripture, prayer and devotional time (okay, I slipped that in – the pastor's duty-bound list for Lent.) We're on a journey. The destination IS NOT just around the corner. Let's be aware **of** the journey. Pause in order to look and observe and absorb, and contemplate!

Pause to remember our dependence on God. God's waiting.

Like the people that Joel was writing to, we have grown apart from God...and it is here, at this point, that we are vulnerable and “return with all our hearts.”

When we pause we'll see that God's hand is waiting, outstretched and God is hoping for us to "return." God *could* hand out holy retribution, but we have this time of "pause" to realize that our relationship with, our time with God is precious.

One moment outside a relationship is one too many.

God is waiting.

We are in covenant with God, we've fallen in sin, but God is *always* calling us back... "return to Me..."

And, it'll come from our hearts...yes?

With an inward change of heart, our response to God's unfailing love and forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, will change our lives.

It'll be an inward change starting in our hearts, affecting our minds, too, and then will be seen by our outward actions.

The end of Mother Teresa's quote earlier: "*the fruit of distrust is apathy*" is this: "*the fruit of faith is charity*" and by that I "hear" when our repentance comes from our hearts our actions will be seen as genuine and true.

I've spent a lot of time tonight on the 12th verse of Joel's 2nd chapter.

The next verse is such an affirmation!

"Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love..."

What a great and awesome God we serve!

When we consider God's graciousness and compassion...

...how God **is** slow to anger...

...and that God overflows in love...

...we CAN BE MOVED to serve God humbly!

Dear Ones, our God is holding out for us to "return to" Him.

God is holding out for US!

And He desires a personal, caring relationship with each of us.

We are SO special to God.

Spade's a spade....How close is your relationship with God?
And are you hearing God calling YOU to return?

Forty days of Lent before we recall the ultimate sacrifice that was made on our behalf....sounds like an adequate amount of time to get started and respond to the One who is holding out for each one of us to come back!

“Return to me with all your heart....”