

ASHWED.C1

Ash Wednesday
February 21, 2007

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

If a person doesn't want to change, God doesn't have much to offer.

Ash Wednesday begins both the Season of Lent. This ancient season of austerity is based on Jesus' forty-day fast in preparation for his public ministry. The early church used the forty days prior to the Easter celebration to prepare candidates for baptism and to call the faithful to commitment and renewal. The traditional practices of Lent – study, prayer, self-discipline, and charity – are calls to repentance that will make way for a new life. Lent operates on the assumption that people *want* a new life, an assumption that is becoming harder to justify with each passing spring.

Change can be hard. Examining our lives to see if we need to change can be hard. Our society often looks for ways to approve of how we already are – rather than wonder if we ought to change. Even in church, sometimes people gather hoping for affirmation of what they already think – not to try to change their minds. For some people, to the extent that self-denial and charity are embraced at all, they may be understood as a way to self-realization. It is Ash Wednesday and we are faced with the challenge of proclaiming that the Good News is not an amplification of the life people already have. Instead, this is an opportunity to offer a profound gift – the news that life is more than we are capable of making it.

Lent is not just one more self-help program. This holy season is an ancient attempt to convince the faithful that self-help is not particularly helpful. Help is from God.

This time of preparation begins with the mark of the cross and a repetition of God's reminder that people die. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." God

offered that contradiction to the claim the serpent had made just a short time before. You remember, Eve was looking at the tree and its fruit and the serpent said, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4 NRSV).

This affluent, self-reliant, independent society often gathers on the premise that they know good and evil very well, thank you, and it is our task to repeat God’s words to rebut a tenacious serpent whose message is still very attractive despite an abysmal record of achievement. With the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”, the are reminded that life is more than survival. We are called to place our dust in the hands of God who knows how to give dust purpose, direction, and meaning.

So we have a highly visible sign of God’s activity. This evening, we are marked with the charred remains of last year’s palms that welcomed Jesus to our worship services on Palm Sunday. This tangible sign, a cross of ashes, is a gift from God for people who are ready to change and celebrate a new life.

Tonight we begin the season of Lent and these scriptures are for more than just this evening. Tonight sets the spirit for the entire season of Lent. The readings provide an opportunity to gain new insights and to renew ourselves with familiar words and old traditions. The themes of change, fasting, community, and self-examination are all presented.

CHANGE

It is comfortable to assume that an omnipotent God would never change – until we think of the implications. An unchangeable God would not call his children to new ideas, would not respond to the needs of his creation, and would not answer prayer. The prophet Joel called people to change with the words “Return to the LORD, your God” but the relationship depends upon a living God who is also capable of change. “...for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

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?" When the people repent, God, too, may change. Joel does not demand; he portrays God's response in terms of what he hopes God will do. But Joel's confidence is based on God's own description of himself in Exodus 34:6. He repeats God's assertion that he is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love". And, when Judah's fortunes have been restored, the people will return to the practice of sacrifice ("a grain offering and a drink offering"). Sacrifice as a joyful opportunity is also a theme of Lent.

The people are called to *return* to the LORD with all their heart. God is known as one who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and *relents* from punishing." *Returning* and *relenting* point to a relationship that depends upon change.

SACRED FASTING

Joel 2:15 instructs God's people to "sanctify a fast", an oxymoron to anyone who defines a relationship with God as self-fulfillment and maximizing one's potential. A person who wants a relationship with God in order to get ahead in the world will not see any sanctity in self-denial.

Let us consider that self-denial can be holy. Sacred time can be spent choosing *not* to gratify every appetite. A fast is sanctified with devotion and commitment; it is not just endured. "Sanctify a fast" is different from "learn to do without." Just as one would not eat before an expected guest has arrived, Lent is a holy waiting for a feast that is assured – but not to be celebrated without preparation.

COMMUNITY

The prophet Joel does not point to any individuals who are particularly sinful or who have ruptured the relationship with God; he addresses the community. The notion of communal responsibility seems to have been more accepted in Joel's day and communal

repentance did not require any explanation. Judgment is coming on “all the inhabitants of the land” and Joel calls for a communal response. “Call a solemn assembly; gather the people.” Joel lists the aged, children, infants, brides and grooms – the whole production cycle; everybody must gather.

Communal repentance carries the profound acknowledgement of our life together. With mutual support, encouragement, and shared goals the community is strengthened in a relationship with a living God.

REFLECTION

The Gospel reading assigned for Ash Wednesday is from the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21, Jesus takes self-examination to a deeper level with his teaching that our relationship with God does not depend upon our ability to put on appearances, but on God’s ability to see past them. It is not how we can make ourselves look that gives us treasure in heaven; it is how God observes. On the subjects of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, Jesus gives various instructions, but each time ends with the same words, “your Father who sees in secret will reward you”. The appearance that we work to produce is fleeting and false. God sees us with a depth that goes beyond the images we want to project. In Lent we are reminded that true examination has less to do with how we see ourselves than how God sees us.

Forty days are before us, a tithe of the year. Let’s offer these days to God and spend them in self-discipline, strengthening or community, and in self-examination. Those themes of Lent may not be a description of how our lives are now, but God calls us with an offer to make our lives better.

The love and grace of God will make our lives change.