

Ash Wednesday 2021, Return to the Lord your God

1. Lent is a season of reflection and repentance as we slow down to consider why Jesus went to the cross.
 - a. Our sins, our shortcomings, and our failures are ever before us.
 - i. Ash Wednesday, perhaps more than any other day during Lent, brings us low as we hear God's words to Adam after the fall: **"You are dust, and to dust you shall return."** (Genesis 3:19).
 - ii. But this word of Law is not God's last word; He also offers a promise of salvation when we turn back to Him.
 - b. "Return to the Lord your God!" from Joel 2 is the theme of our Lenten worship series this year.
 - i. God's call to return is a call to join Jesus on His path to the cross.
 - ii. But for us this path doesn't lead to death but to blessings from God and the gift of eternal life in Christ.
 - iii. God calls us into relationship with Him and with other Christians, people who walk the path with us to share in their blessings.
2. The book of Joel provides a prophecy of the coming judgment of God with the image of a horde of locusts swarming over the land, destroying everything.
 - a. In the middle of this frightening vision, God extends His invitation through Joel: **"Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and He relents over disaster."** (Joel 2:13).
 - i. It's as though He said: "You have turned away from Me in your hearts and minds, and I have shown you where that path will take you. But it is not too late. Turn back! Return to the Lord! I am gracious and merciful, and I will bless you."
 - ii. Our reading orients us for Lent identifying the problem: we are separated from God by our sins.
 - iii. And lays out the solution: God calls us to return to Him, because He has provided for our salvation.
 - b. We don't know a lot about Joel. He was a prophet, likely ministering in the Southern Kingdom of Judah but we're not even sure when his ministry took place
 - i. The book that bears his name is relatively short—only three chapters, seventy-three verses in total.
 - ii. He begins his book talking about a plague of locusts that had or would strike Israel, **"What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten."** (Joe 1:4)

- c. Whether that plague was literal or figurative is unclear, but Joel's message is plain: he's comparing that plague with the day of judgment that will come, **"Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes."** (Joe 1:15)
 - i. And he pleads with the people to repent and turn to God in faith so that they would be found righteous saying, **"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments."** (Joe 2:12-13)
 - ii. Jews to this day tear their clothing in a display of grief and Joel is saying, "Let your repentance be for real and not just a display."
 - d. That's because Joel brings good news in the face of that impending day, he reminds the people about God saying, **"He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and He relents over disaster"** (Joel 2:13).
 - i. Israel needed to stop trusting in themselves and to trust in God who has revealed that He is merciful and loving.
 - ii. They needed to realize that just as they couldn't stop the swarming locusts, neither would they be able to stop Judgment Day.
 - iii. It will come. All will be affected. And the only solution is to return to the Lord.
 - iv. But as the Lord promises in our reading that He would bless those who are faithful, **"Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations."** (Joe 2:19)
3. But are those words only for the Israelites? Isn't God's call to return to Him with penitent hearts an invitation for us, as well?
- a. Just as Joel was calling the people to repentance from their sin in light of a plague of locusts, our sins are like locusts, too.
 - i. And while one little locust, just like one little sin, doesn't seem all that problematic, when the entire list of them is considered it is an overwhelming plague.
 - ii. Think of the times you coveted your neighbor's property. When you spoke ill of your co-worker. When you helped yourself to the office supplies at work because you felt they owed it to you. And when you lusted after that guy or that girl. When you lost your temper and screamed at the guy on the bike who didn't get out of your way. When you treated your father with contempt or dismissed your mother's request to clean up your mess. When you avoided worship because you just didn't care to hear what that boring preacher had to say. When you put together a string of curses that would

make a sailor blush. When you decided that you knew better than God in just about everything and on and on it goes.

- iii. Joel's words should hit us the same way they hit the Israelites.
 - iv. The Day of the Lord will come with terror like a swarm of locusts, and the prospect of eternal death and damnation should terrify us.
- b. And just as Joel had a word of promise in the face of the Day of Judgment for Israel, he brings good news for us too! The same promise he gave to Israel, **"Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster."** (Joel 2:13).
- i. In spite of our sinful rejection of God, He invites us to return to Him and promises to bless you.
 - ii. The Lord calls us to stop trusting in ourselves and look to Him.
 - iii. He is not angry with us as our sins deserve but through the blood of His Son shed for us, He invites us into His grace.
 - iv. As Joel concludes at the end of this chapter, **"It shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."** (Joel 2:32).
- c. Over the coming weeks, we will explore how God's call to return affects our lives, and we'll do so by walking in the steps of the disciples and those with Jesus in the final days of His life.
- i. Next Wednesday we will spend some time with Peter, James, and John as they accompany Jesus as He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane when we are called to "Return to Prayer."
 - ii. Join us for each of our midweek services as we follow Joel's call to **"gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants"** (Joel 2:16).
 - iii. We'll come together and listen to God's call, and we will, **"Return to the Lord our God for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love"** (Joel 2:13).