



“Turning”

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

February 25, 2009

scripture text: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Our reading this afternoon comes from the book of the prophet Joel 2: 1-2, and picking up in v. 12. It is a prophesy to the people Judah who are facing judgment to turn away from their sin.

“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- 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...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. Return to the Lord, your God, 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? Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; 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. 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?’” Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people.”

Scholars debate about the specifics of the historical context surrounding the book of Joel. This minor prophet (the book only has 3 chapters) wrote, it is believed, somewhere between 500 and 350 B.C.E. and it is thought that he compiled veins of thought from the other prophets that had gone before him while intermingling his own vision.

But what is perhaps intentional ambiguity with regard to the specifics by the author allows for a message with universal appeal. The author is writing to the people- to God’s people- who are facing destruction from within and from without. Enemies lay at the gates on the outside, and the reality of their sin on the inside leaves them vulnerable to God’s judgment that would fall upon them.

Joel gives us a little taste of the apocalyptic literature most sensationalized in the book of Revelation. His prophesy is filled with vivid imagery that is designed to appeal to the imagination of the reader with emotional descriptions of great and terrible things.

In the verses that the lectionary perhaps not surprisingly passes over between the beginning of our reading and the end there is a description of God’s army of judgment that rides in the form of giant horses coming to trample over the city of Judah, spilling in through all the cracks in the houses so that none can hide, to burn and lay to waste everything in its path- never before and never since will such an army be seen, the prophet says, and everything will be laid out in the open, everything exposed for what it is, and what is residing in the hearts of the people will be revealed.

And God will do what God will do. Who knows, the text says, weather he will turn and relent or not? And so blow the trumpet, the prophet says- assemble the congregation.

The youngest children have been born into a society of sin- bring them. The elderly also are not excused. Although the bridegroom used to be exempt from military service for a year after his wedding- even he must forego his wedded bliss to join the ranks of this congregation and his bride too.

Ministers, start praying. People, the prophet says- rend your hearts. God doesn't care about outer displays of regret or grief or fear or apology such as the people used to do in tearing their clothes to show their sorrow- rend your hearts- he says. Return to the Lord.

In the prophet's mind there is a great struggle taking place within us and our world between sin and righteousness. And while certainly it is a very personal thing, the charge to return to God is a collective call. Because the reality of sin is implicating and destroying all the people.

And therefore none can be exempt from the work at hand. From the work of repentance- literally, of turning- turning our hearts- in the ancient mind, the seat of our will, our thinking, our emotions- away from a life that is dictated by our willfulness and toward a life lived in obedience to God.

God does not just want us to do the right things. God wants us to be changed by the reality of his presence, grace, forgiveness, and love- and to live like we are changed. In our sinfulness we wander- turning to our own way, and God wants us to return to him.

And such a turning requires a deliberate act of acknowledgment and confession and a deliberate act of will. And it means that life will look differently than before. It has to. This is the call. For everyone.

--

In the book of Isaiah, the Lord marvels at the disconnect between the desire of our hearts and the reality of our ways. He says, "day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God."

He's got a point. There is wisdom in the link between our willingness to commit to growing in righteousness through cultivating our relationship with God and that desire to go deeper that is implanted in each of us.

There is a connection between the discipline of reflection and repentance and intentional seeking and the open arms and heart of the Lord that we long for most. Consistent among the prophets is their call for the people to do their part. Not so that God will be coerced into doing something for them in return. Not because this is some sort of a bargain for equal exchange with God. But because more than anything God desires to share his very nature with us because within God's nature is an immensity of love so great that it has to be given away.

God offers us the fullness of his life, and the greatest gift we can give to God is to accept the gift of life that he offers us in return. "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart... Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

God gives the desire to seek him, God gives the means by which he may be sought, and God stands ready to be found. "Return to me" God beckons. All of you gather together, and make the choice to return to the Lord.

God is yearning to share the divine life with us, and not just because he cannot help but give himself away in all of that abounding love, but because also at stake is God's glory. "Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" the prophet asks.

There really is no reason why the world should not see and know him. Because on the other side of **the turning of a heart** is the surrender to the activity of God **in a life** that cannot help then but overflow with that same steadfast, abounding love in the world such that all may know his name--that is God's glory revealed. Clearly there is still much work and returning to be done.

"Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high." The Lord says through the prophet Isaiah. "Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;...Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday."

The book of Joel continues after our text, "In response to his people who repented the Lord said: I am sending you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied ... "You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.

And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other ... Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions ... and all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Ash Wednesday is a day of confession. To recall that we have no future apart from God. And Lent is a season of repentance- 40 days devoted to the discipline of turning our hearts to the Lord lest we rush to resurrection too quickly and forget to give pause to recall why it was- and still is- that Christ had to die at all.

It is a season of turning to the Lord with openness and humility and claiming that part of us that still calls for his crucifixion every day. That part of us that still insists on having it our way. That part of us that requires an act of God's grace and our will if it is

to ever die with Christ so that it can be reborn with him into something that is entirely new and full of life.

Life that spills over into our living. Living that reveals the glory of God to the world. Amen.