

Westminster Sermon – “Yet Even Now”

Ash Wednesday, February 10, 2016

Scripture Readings – Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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Our first reading comes from the book of the prophet Joel, chapter 2, verses 1 through 2 and 12 through 17.

1 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?’”

The second reading comes from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 6, verses 1-6 and continuing with 16-21.

1 “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

16 “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you 19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

The title of the sermon: Yet Even Now

It is a basic fact that we know all the way back to when we were young children: if we are doing wrong, then we are going to be in trouble when the one in charge gets here and sees what we are doing. I say it is a basic fact that we all know, but really children know this much better than adults do. Adults, we get used to thinking that we are in charge of ourselves, and we aren't reminded nearly as often of our faults. Children and youth, you know perfectly well that other people are authorities over you. You aren't allowed to forget it, are you? And probably from even before you really understood words, there hasn't been a day in which someone hasn't told you in some way, "Stop it. Don't do that," or, "Do it this way, not that way."

It starts out with simple things, mostly for safety: "No! Hot!" But very quickly it becomes moral instruction as well: "No hitting!" "That doesn't belong to you; give it back." "Don't talk to other people that way." "I expect you to tell me the truth." Then you go to school, and you hear, "This is how you should have done that math problem instead," or "No running in the hall," or "No cheating allowed!"

We adults, however, unless we do things that get us in trouble with the law, have a much harder time remembering that we are responsible to anyone other than ourselves. We don't usually wind up in situations where anyone is going to show up and ground us or send us to our rooms. Sure, most of us have bosses at work, but they only get to tell us what to do in our jobs. In our personal lives, we adults can largely do what we want. Someone could nag us, or even yell at us, but nobody is in *charge* of us like our parents once were. If we adults want to do foolish things like smoking or drinking too much, or immoral things like being mean to everyone around us, nobody is going to walk in and catch us and punish us.

Or so we like to think. We like to think that very much, and this is part of why we don't always enjoy the parts of the Bible that sound like our first reading today. "Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming," it warns us. "Sound the alarm," it cries out. "Blow the trumpet... sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly."¹ Get everyone together, it says, and announce that the one who is in charge of everyone and everything in the whole universe is on the way, and we're all in big trouble.

Why are we in trouble? The same reason we have ever been in trouble: we're not doing what we're supposed to be doing. We treat people selfishly. We put others down, and we take for ourselves instead of sharing. Or we see other people hurting and we do nothing. We pretend it isn't our problem when someone else is getting picked on or beat up in the schoolyard. We pretend it isn't our problem when we see someone far away starving on television, watching this tragedy on a large screen TV that cost enough to provide that starving person with food for half a year.

Meanness around us, selfishness within us, and not caring for others everywhere. This is not the way things should be, and we all do know it. We don't avoid the scary warnings in the Bible because they are nonsense, but because we know they are telling a true story, a story of what happens if

¹ From Joel 2:1-17 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

our heavenly Father walks in on us and catches us humans having broken the whole world, and not even trying very hard to put it back together.

The prophet Joel reminds us that we're all in it together. "[G]ather the people," he says. "Sanctify the congregations; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast."² The ministers, the newly married, everyone. Joel is like a child telling all of the other children: get in here for a minute and listen! Look around! We made a huge mess. We broke half the dishes. We flooded the bathroom. We let the dog loose outside the house and we can't find it. One of us caught a snake and let it loose *inside* the house, and we can't find that, either. Mom and Dad are going to be home in 15 minutes! We're in big trouble!

What do you do when you are in trouble like that? In trouble for things that are way too big to fix, with way too little time left?

There is really only one thing you can do.

We all probably remember the childhood ritual of being dragged in front of someone to say we are sorry. Our parents forced us to learn the practice of apology. We are asked to stop pretending we did nothing wrong, and then we go to someone we harmed, we admit we are at fault, and we ask for forgiveness.

It is hard to do that, because saying we did wrong hurts. Saying we sinned makes us feel bad. And we think that pretending nothing is wrong makes us feel better.

But you know what *really* makes us feel better? Not just a little better, but all the way better? Being forgiven. When we just go along trying to imagine that everything is okay, we live with buried anxiety, because a part of us always knows it is not really okay. But when we stop denying it and let ourselves be distraught over all the things we have done wrong, and when that other person sees us in our honesty and sorrow, and looks us in the eye and says, "You are forgiven. Be at peace," that is where we find true comfort and rest.

When I was a child, I lived with my father, and later with my stepfather. Both of them were men who were unafraid to reprimand us when we did wrong. And for most of my childhood and youth, I saw and expected a pattern: the worse the thing was that I did wrong, the more I got in trouble. The bigger the offense, the more I had to fear the punishment.

But when I got a little older, I saw something else emerge. For when one of us messed up in a really big way, like failing a class and not graduating, or crashing the car, something different and unexpected happened. There was no question in such a case of pretending that it was all okay. We had to go and admit to something we felt completely awful about. And at the very moment when we expected the fatherly anger to come at its worst of all...it did not. It became clear in that terrifying and surprising moment that when something with serious consequences was on the line, fatherly concern for us and for our well-being was the top priority. We came, beside ourselves with guilt, and found that anger was set aside for our sake, and forgiveness was offered freely. When I recognized this, I knew it to be a lesson about fatherly love that I hope to live out myself.

² Joel 2:16 (NRSV).

Can we find mercy like that at the hands of God? The prophet Joel tells us that we can. We are warned that we are in trouble. And we are told we had better come together and remember that we are sinners, and declare that we are sorry. But why does he tell us this? Not just to make us scared. No, it is because, he says, “Yet even now,” we can return to the Lord with all our heart. We can repent and be forgiven. We are going to have to face God, but God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”³

The warning sounds scary, and it makes us feel bad because we hate admitting when we are wrong and saying we are sorry. But doing this offers something far better in return: true forgiveness. A true release from guilt. A blessing from God instead of a punishment. God is able to take away what is wrong, even the things that are our fault, and dry all our tears.

And so we come together to think about these things tonight, and we put on ashes. They remind us of what is wrong in the world, they remind us of what is wrong in our lives, and they help us to bring to God whatever is wrong. We remember tonight and through the forty days of Lent that it is okay to mourn; no, it is *better* to mourn for what is wrong than to pretend it is right.

We use this season to think about our lives and about our relationship with God. We use this time to try to stop hiding from whatever is wrong, stop running from the need to face it, and do some work to listen and seek out the truth. Perhaps we take on a spiritual discipline for the season, giving up something in our daily lives or adopting some other kind of practice in order to keep before us our need for God’s forgiveness. We believe in this forgiveness because we know Easter is at the end of the journey. We trust that God will lift us up from the ashes. God does not hate us, and God does not abandon us when we do wrong. God offers us help and forgiveness.

And so we pray with the Psalmist: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love... you desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart... Let me hear joy and gladness... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”⁴ Amen.

³ Joel 2:12-13 (NRSV).

⁴ From Psalm 51 (NRSV).