

Grace Lutheran Church
40 N. Main St., Hatfield, PA 19440
Ash Wednesday + March 2, 2022
“Rend Your Hearts” (Joel 2)
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

The call in Joel to “rend your hearts” is not a summons, as you might assume, to a private devotional practice. Rather, on this day in history, the reading from Joel we hear every Ash Wednesday is calling us out of the whirlwind of world events to take a public stand against evil. It is calling us to step into action and participate in the coming of God’s kingdom into the world that God so loves. It is calling us not into piety but into justice.

Typically we enter into Ash Wednesday expecting to be called to sit in sackcloth and ashes, as was the Biblical custom for those brought face to face with the magnitude of their sin. The haunting verses of Psalm 51 remind us how we continue to fall short before God--“For I know my offenses, and my sin is ever before me” -- and Matthew reminds us of the solemnity of our private devotions.

How is Joel different? Because Joel Chapter 2 says nothing about repentance. There is no word about how people have sinned or that they should seek God’s forgiveness. Instead, in this reading we find ourselves swept up in a great prophetic warning of coming destruction. Joel seems to be referring to the great locust plague described in his previous chapter, but it could also be symbolic for an impending attack by some threatening army.

In today’s reading, the plague is closing in. The alarm is being sounded. The great blast of the shofar, the ram’s horn, echoes across the valley, calling the community to be on the alert. Clouds and thick darkness are spreading across the land. Verses 3-11, which we don’t get, speak of the terror of the impending destruction and its devastating effect on the people. Finally we hear in verse 12 God’s call through the prophet for people to act: “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart.”

Scripture always addresses us in the midst of where we are in life at the moment we encounter it. At this moment in history, a dark cloud is rolling across a free European nation. Yet the call to act has already been put out. Almost overnight, decades of tentative foreign policy by European nations has been reversed in a well-coordinated series of sanctions, with more announced every day. It is being said we are an inflection point for democracy: “It’s as if we woke up from a slumber not to a dystopian nightmare where selfishness, indifference and moral obtuseness dominate, but to an energized atmosphere where collective decency, seriousness and sacrifice can flower.”

It is from within this movement of world history that we hear the call to “rend your hearts.” It’s not enough to lament that evil triumphs when good people do nothing, and then to sit back and do nothing.

And rending is not just ripping or tearing, it is vigorous tearing. Rending our hearts means engaging in serious soul-searching about how we are called to live. Paul writes in Galatians that "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me," and then points out that in our baptism we are "clothed with Christ." Being clothed with Christ is a tricky business. The clothing doesn't always fit at first -- in fact, it never fits at first. We struggle, we chafe, at times we are tempted to just shrug it off and leave it on the dressing room floor. But gradually we accommodate our lives to this clothing until we can sing, with hymn writer Susan Cherwien, "Beloved, God's chosen, put on like a garment compassion, forgiveness, and goodness of heart" (ELW 648).

What we are seeing on the world landscape, or at least what we hope we are seeing, is that if we come together in a common purpose, we can peacefully yet powerfully oppose forces that would deny people the dignity of self-determination and the ability to live fully and freely. As we move into Lent and open our hearts to God in prayer, we will discover what this means for each of us. And not just each of us as individuals, but as members of their vibrant faith community, and as citizens of a nation in which, even in the midst of the stresses of our own systems, we still have the freedom to work together to help bring about a world in which, someday, the lion will lie down with the lamb.

Our prayer is always that God's kingdom will come, a kingdom in which God's people are free to live and love and work and flourish as full members of Christ's body. So this Lent let's step out of our sackcloth, put on the clothing of Christ, and begin living into our baptismal calling as ministers of justice and peace.

Amen.