

Ash Wednesday
February 14, 2024
Holy Family Episcopal Church
Laurel Springs NJ
Joel 2:1-2, 2-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”

I don't know how the rest of you feel, but for me, I find the confluence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day a little disconcerting. The juxtaposition of a day focusing on prayer, fasting and the beginning of one's Lenten discipline with a day that celebrates the universal values of love and relationship. God loves us so much that He sent His only Son to live and die so that we can be with Him for eternity is one amazing Valentine's Day gift!

This has happened before in recent memory in 2018. I think I remember it because it also the date of the Parkland, Florida school shooting. Seventeen students and staff were shot dead at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14, 2018. As a public school teacher, school shootings always hit me particularly hard. I did not hear about this until I left school for the day and arrived for the 4 PM family focused Ash Wednesday service at Christ Church, Riverton. I remember not being able to focus at all during my planned children's homily and the Ash Wednesday liturgy that followed. I believe I will always be reminded of those horrific events whenever Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day coincide and I remember those precious souls tonight.

After the sermon ends in the Ash Wednesday liturgy, it is customary for the Celebrant to invite us, “in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent.” The Church invites us to self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and reading and meditating on God's holy Word. Many of us will recall what we have “given up “in

Lents past. For me those things include chocolate, wine, social media, fast food, Barry Manilow – when I was 16, and even meat. Or maybe we remember gathering for soup and sandwich suppers in the parish hall. We might remember trying to decide whether or not we keep the ashes on our forehead all day or to wipe them off.

Most of us have associations with Lent, and often they focus on ourselves. After all, the Church’s invitation to a holy Lent includes two references to the self: self-examination and self-denial. This focus on the self makes sense to some degree; there is truth in the slogan the only person you can change is...yourself.” But I wonder if this Lent we might expand the focus of our Lenten discipline – nudging beyond the boundaries of self, or even our church communities, toward the wider world, towards society. None of us exist in a vacuum apart from societal influences and societies are collection of selves. If we change ourselves, we change society. And the reverse is also true; if society changes, we are changed also.

While this understanding of porous boundaries between self and society is not especially apparent in the Church’s invitation to a holy Lent, it is evident elsewhere. The ancient baptismal liturgy is a good example; and in it, we renounce evil on three different “levels “: the cosmic level by renouncing “Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God “; the social level, by renouncing “the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, “and, of course, the personal level, the level of the self, by renouncing “all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. “

Lent provides us a concentrated period of time – 46 days between Ash Wednesday and sundown on Maundy Thursday – to do all we can, with the Holy Spirit’s help, to “get right with God.” In fact, St. Paul encouraged the Corinthians, and us as well to “be reconciled to God.” So if you’re counting, that means that Sundays are not included in Lent. Each Sunday is a “little Easter”. God can do some pretty amazing things with us in 40 days’ time. And this year, one marked by excessive

political rancor, political divide, and societal violence, you are invited to expand the focus beyond the self with the traditional practices of praying, fasting, and almsgiving, as presented in Matthews gospel, toward a practice suggested by the prophet Joel: communal lament.

Joel writes, “between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.” Try to imagine this in your mind eye: instead of a somber procession with the priest following the cross, expressionless, he is weeping and wailing as he goes down the center aisle! Most of us would probably dash for the doors, run for the hills, or at least give him a tissue so that he could get himself together. Crying in public is something that most of us try to avoid with me being an exception. We definitely don’t want to be accused of getting overly emotional. But Joel encourages weeping clergy- priests who can cry out, warn, lament over the tragedy playing out in society. In the first chapter of Joel alone, either God or Joel, speaking on God’s behalf, describes lament, mourning, crying out, or groaning no fewer than seven times. Even the animals in the soil are mourning or crying out! Why all of this lamentation, this mourning, this crying?

Well, we don’t know exactly what prompted Joel’s prophecy. We do know it was a time of tremendous crisis in the land, literally the soil, the foundation supporting all life, was being destroyed either by locusts or a foreign army. Joel shouts the warning siren: “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain. Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble.”

Perhaps lament is the first step towards repentance, at least on the social level. And maybe the weeping priest models for us how to lament. We lament as we approach the holiest place in our lives: the altar.

-The place where we remember Christ’s death, proclaim his resurrection, and await His coming again.

-The place where we participate in Christ death and resurrection to new life.

-The place where we receive a foretaste of the heavenly banquet where there will be no more crying and nothing personally or socially or cosmically to weep about.

Of course, lament is not something we do easily in our culture. In fact, most of us vehemently dislike it. One of our favorite ways to avoid lament is to play the blame game. I recently saw an editorial cartoon that poked fun at both the political left and right. It showed a man complaining about President Biden and a woman complaining about former President Trump. At the bottom, their complaints were identical. “Because of him the nation is divided.” Instead of looking at the growing partisan divide and feeling the pain of it, we often prefer to blame “the other side” for it and stoke our anger.

Another popular way to avoid lament is to deny that there is any pain. It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to think about ways we deny our pain – substance abuse comes first to mind. And I’m not just talking about street drugs or the opioid crisis, but the significant increase in alcohol consumption we see you across the board and especially among women, minorities, seniors, those with less formal education, and lower incomes. Instead of feeling the pain and offering a lament to God, many of us choose consciously or unconsciously to become numb.

But what happens to us and for us when we lament, instead of denying our pain or blaming something or someone else for it? And what might we imagine happens to God? When we lament, we recognize the limits of our ability to control the world around us. We are at our wits end, as the Psalmist puts it, and out of desperation cry out to a power greater than ourselves, we cry out to the Lord. We allow ourselves to feel the pain of social problems and injustices that result from systems that are too complicated, too entrenched, too big, for any one of us to fix. We air out our complaints, we tell the truth of our suffering, we question God’s love, we confess our despair, we cry out our tears. And we beg. We beg, and we plead for God’s help, for God to intervene, to act, to have mercy on us, to help us “turn and be healed.”

And for God's part? Well, the testimony of scripture shows us that God has responded in many and various ways to lamentation. In the book of Lamentations, God is silent. More often, however, God's response is one in which both judgment and salvation seem to happen simultaneously. And sometimes, God intervenes and saves us in ways we hope for. That's what happens in the prophecy of Joel. In the midst of the great social crisis, the people lament, not about their personal experience, but about what has happened to their society. Together they fast. They pray. They beg. They return to God. And they discover again that God is "slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love," a God who is eager to leave a blessing behind.

So this evening we hear the Church's invitation to observe a holy Lent—to pray, to fast, to read God's word. Let's remember Joel's invitation to us to lament. To cry aloud, to mourn, to weep, to feel and express the pain of the world. What is the pain for you in your place? Is it violence? The political divide? Addiction? Is it generational poverty that we can't seem to legislate our way beyond? What does your community lament? And how might your community cry out together to God about it? "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning... Who knows whether the Lord will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind...?"

And may we reach the end of our Lenten journey renewed, restored, and reconciled to God. Amen.