



ASH WEDNESDAY

(The Beginning of the Lenten Season)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Wednesday, February 17, 2010

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Lection – Joel 2:12-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 12) Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; (v. 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. (v. 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?

(v. 15) Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; (v. 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.

(v. 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?’”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Ash Wednesday begins the Lenten season. It is a period of repentance; and, some use it as a period of abstinence from things that they desire or want to give up once and for all. At its core, Ash Wednesday is a time of returning one’s heart to God as a way of anticipating the

resurrection of the Savior celebrated at Easter. (See today's cultural resource unit for a detailed description of Ash Wednesday.)

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Joel 2:12-17

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

For years, my traditional notion of Ash Wednesday was that it was only a time in the year when one gave up something that they enjoyed. This notion is not totally without merit. There is much we would do well to give up. America remains a nation of gluttons even in the midst of harsh economic realities. I live in a state hard hit by the economy. The official unemployment rate is ten percent. Add to that those who are under-employed and those who have just given up finding employment and the rate is believed to be as high as sixteen percent! In spite of this, I still see shoppers everywhere I go flashing credit cards. No one is walking or biking; traffic jams still abound. The latest video games still fly off shelves, and the ritzy over-priced mall where I live (Lenox Square) is still roping people in. Yes. The homeless population has exploded, but we continue to buy, buy, buy and eat, eat, eat and waste, waste, waste anyway. So, Lord knows we need a period of abstinence from so much materialism. Not to mention our gluttony for war, divisiveness and imparting pain to one another and to the earth—abstinence is indeed a lofty goal for Ash Wednesday.

However, over the years, I've learned that giving up that which we covet without turning our hearts back or to God will only leave us tied again to our toys, trinkets, and gods after we have given the Almighty God cursory attention. There is a saying: "If you do it right the first time, you won't have to do it again." And so it is as we mark another Ash Wednesday. If we truly use this time to repent of all of our unholy living and return to God in a way that makes clear that we want to be sanctified by and satisfied with our holy God, then and only then can Ash Wednesday become more than just a period of momentary abstinence, momentary repentance and momentary renewal. Joel was also after more than momentary repentance by Judah. He wanted the people to do it right and to do it fully.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Joel is the son of Pethuel; he uses his father's name to distinguish himself as his was a very common name. It means "Yahweh is God." To arrive with such a name at any time is a good thing; but, during perilous times, Joel's name surely associates him among the faithful. Joel says little else about himself except that he has a word that has come to him from the Lord Joel 1:1.

The book of Joel is written mainly in poetic form. When reading it, one senses that black preachers would long have been comfortable placing the words of this God man in their mouths. Why? Because his word patterns are rhythmic and his metaphors are crisp. He regularly uses alliteration; and, his words are tender yet strong and vivid. Historically, these are common features of great black preaching. Joel's writing is akin to the homiletic style of outstanding black preachers who take you into the Bible and make you believe the story is happening at the moment you are hearing it even if, as in Joel's case, the people had experienced it. This is called giving an "eyewitness account."

In chapter one, which provides the backdrop for today's lectionary scripture, Joel makes us see, hear and feel the locusts swarming, tearing up crops, and being devastating pests as they move through each stage of existence from a palmerworm to a caterpillar. "That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten" Joel 1:4. These four stages of locusts have been referred to as: (1) the gnawing locust; (2) the swarming locust; (3) the licking locust; and (4) the consuming locust.¹ When locusts hatch and swarm, they can be as dense as four to five thousand insects per square meter; and, they strip all green foliage, destroying crops and trees.² In chapter one, Joel calls the roll of all that is lost as the locusts invade (the wine is gone, bark is stripped from the vine, grain and drink offerings for the temple are gone, the fields are ruined, the vines are destroyed, the fig trees are withered, the pomegranate and the apple tree and all trees are dried up, the cattle morn, herds have no pasture, sheep suffer and the streams are dried up [(Joel 1:1-20]).

After this horrifying news, Joel is not finished. Here we enter the territory of today's text. In chapter two, he warns of a mighty but unidentified army that threatens Judah. The result of the attack will be so awful that it will affect the universe (2:10). "While this is most likely a metaphorical description of the invading locusts, it drives home the destructive capability of the invaders."³ It likely also fanned the rumor mill about what would happen if an invading army of men also entered the city, since Judah definitely had enemies. The locusts have come, but the total damage they have wrought is still unknown; much more pain is to come from these relentless warriors. As they are reeling from all of this, everyone is knocked off their feet when Joel announces who leads this army that has invaded—it is the Lord who "thunders at the head of his army" (2:11)!

With this backdrop, if I were preparing to preach this passage which is written in poetic form, I would be drawn to the obvious alliteration brought forth by chapter one and our scripture for today. The obvious alliterative headings are return, rend, and reap.

Return

After Joel's graphic pronouncement of devastation, an equally graphic call for repentance is made by the Lord: "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning." This is a tri-pronged complete return. Fast so that your body and mind is focused on God; weep because you realize the level of your failure before God; and mourn because of the magnitude of your grief over your state of being. In other words, with all of your being return to God.

This Ash Wednesday as we posit a return to God, it's not, in most cases, a matter of our having totally left God; but, it is the case that our feet have strayed from many of the places where we met God. The result, too often, is that destruction follows for us and our family and our community and the nation.

In times of distress, such as those currently faced by the country, people are apt to ask, "Where is God in all of this?" Or "Why is God allowing all of this?" Of course God is where God has always been -- "keeping watch over God's world." As for the why we know not why. None of us are omniscient. But we do know that God has a permissive will. God permitted the locusts that

wreaked havoc on Judah. This is not to say that God desired our economic crash. It is not God's desire that people lose their homes, jobs and sanity. However, God will not stop us from engaging in the behaviors that cause our ruin unless we want to be stopped. From "hedge fund heathens," to "in it for the profits not the people politicians," to "John and Jane Public who sit by and say 'We can't change it,'" all of us contribute to this nation's failure to truly return to God. Even the Church is guilty through acts of omission and commission of maintaining the status quo.

True return to God begins in our hearts/minds and gets in our hands and our feet. A song says: "I got it in my walk. I got it in my talk. I got it in my feet. I got it all over me." This means that the moves we make are all made with returning to God in mind. The causes we support are supported with this in mind. The things we buy, the way we treat others, all is done with this in mind.

Nursing infants, children, elders, the newly married, **everyone** is told that they are included in this call to return to God. Even the priests are told to go to the area where they perform their work "between the altar and the temple porch" and weep. There, they are to also ask God to spare the people and help them avoid being embarrassed in front of their enemies. This is still the role of those who are called to intercede for God's people; as these men and women enter their praying ground, they weep for God's people and God's world, and seek the mercy of God. How much do we need this today? The need is so great one can scarcely articulate it. Yes, great sermons are needed. Yes, marching and advocacy in the public square are needed. Yes, the sacraments and Bible study are needed. But, in addition to all of that, for such a time as this, we need weeping spiritual leaders who will seek God's forgiveness, direction and mercy for God's people.

Rend

Rend your hearts and not your clothing (v 13)a. In Joel's day, it was customary for people to rend their garments as a sign of grief for sins committed. The display was intended to be public, graphic and demonstrative to indicate the level of sorrow felt by the one who had sinned. The Bible is filled with people who rend their clothing and even cover themselves with sackcloth: Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 3:31; 1 Kings 21:27; Esther 4:1; Isaiah 32:11, et al. The word rend is not used modernly. For today's audience, Joel 2:13 could be rendered: Keep your clothes on; God sees past the outer appearance anyway; instead fully open your heart to God. In other words, be clear that sacramental rituals, annual observances, celebration of high holy days, etc., will never take the place of true and humble repentance before God. God personally appeals to Judah and us before and after locust swarms (all manner of natural and other disasters) to open our hearts to God.

Opening our hearts to God becomes increasingly more difficult as our hearts become saturated with all of the trappings of the world. We cannot hear God in meditation, because our ears and our minds are filled with iPods, MP4s, Facebook, cell phones, cable TV and all manner of sound and noise. We cannot hear God through the Word, because we are saturated with other words to which we have turned for direction and wisdom—the words of self-help books, the words of TV hosts and analysts, the words of other media, and even the words of religious personalities we have placed on a throne that should be reserved for God. Opening our hearts to God leads to true

repentance which puts us in right relationship with God. Ash Wednesday affords us yet another opportunity to focus on our relationship with God. That's what God is always after—a genuine closer relationship with us.

Reap

Joel says, “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. (v. 14) And if we repent, says Joel, “who knows” but God might leave a blessing (v 14). That’s all that anyone, even the profiteering impostors who promise otherwise, can ever safely say: who knows? But what does Joel **believe** will be the result of people turning their hearts back to God and priest weeping? To answer this we need to look at Joel’s description of the nature of God (gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and one who relents from punishing). This is a God who loves at a depth and with consistency that we cannot match but hallelujah we are the recipients of this love. This is why Joel has a firm belief that God will deliver the people of God, and it will rain (2:18-19). Yes, rain. Judah has been crippled by an agricultural drought sent by God through locusts. So, they need literal rain. However, they and we need spiritual rain much more. This is the greatest gift that we can receive in spite of all of our other perceived needs. Joel believed that spiritual rain—drops of grace—would begin in Judah and then extend to "all flesh" (all of God’s people) (2:18-3:21). This Ash Wednesday this is our deepest hope.

Celebration

A song by gospel artist Paul Morton says: “I feel the rain. Can anybody out there feel the rain? It’s raining. It’s raining.” When people of God turn to God and are directed by God, the grace of God showers our lives. And, if the grace of God is with us, that’s all that we need. That’s why the elders used to say: “It was grace that woke me up this morning. It was grace that clothed me in my right mind. It was grace that started me on my way. And it is grace that will lead me on.” I believe somebody called that type of grace amazing. Lord, let it rain!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Locust swarms, people crying, people tearing their clothing, priest weeping for the people; and

Sounds: Weeping, mourning, clothing being ripped, a trumpet blowing, a gathering of believers.

Notes

1. For additional information on the locusts discussed in the book of Joel see, Barton, John. Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary. The Old Testament library. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, especially pages 66-76.
2. For more on the destructive nature of locust swarms see, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations online location: <http://fao.org/News/Global/Locusts/Locuhome.htm> accessed 29 October 2009

3. Baker, David W. The NIV Application Commentary: Joel, Obadiah, Malachi. Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2006. p. 69.