



SERMONS THAT WORK

Ash Wednesday

Lament

[RCL] Joel 2:1-2,12-17; Psalm 103 or 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

After the sermon ends in the Ash Wednesday liturgy, it is customary for the minister 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 recall what we have “given up” in Lents past: chocolate, wine, social media, even meat. Or maybe we remember gathering for soup and bread suppers in the fellowship hall. Or trying to decide whether we keep the ashes on our forehead all day or 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 that “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 boundary of *self*, or even our church communities, toward the wider world, toward *society*. None of us exists in a vacuum apart from societal influences, and societies are collections of selves. If we change ourselves, we change society. And the reverse is also true: if society changes, we are changed, too.

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; in it, we renounce evil on three different “levels,” if you will: 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 you from the love of God.”

Lent provides a concentrated period of time—40 days—to do all we can, with the Holy Spirit’s help, to “get right with God.” God can do some pretty amazing things with us in 40 days’ time. And this year, one marked by excessive political rancor and a torrent of natural disasters, you are invited to expand the focus beyond the *self* with the traditional practices of praying, fasting, and giving alms, as presented in Matthew’s 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’s eye: instead of a somber procession with the priest following the cross expressionless, she is weeping and wailing as she goes down the center aisle! Most of us would probably

want to run for the hills, or at least get her a tissue so she could get it together. Crying in public is something that most of us try to avoid...we don't want to be accused of getting overly emotional.

But Joel encourages weeping priests – priests who can cry out, mourn, lament over the tragedy playing out in society. In the first chapter of Joel alone, either God or Joel, speaking on God's behalf, prescribes or describes lament, mourning, crying out, or groaning no fewer than seven times. Even the animals and the soil are mourning and 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: the land, literally the soil, the foundation supporting all life, was being destroyed either by locusts or a foreign army. Joel sounds the air raid siren: "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain. Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble" (Joel 2:1a).

Perhaps lament is the first step toward repentance, at least on the social level. And maybe the weeping priest models for all of 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 wait for his coming again.

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

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

Of course, lament is not something we do easily in our culture. In fact, it is almost anathema to us. One of our favorite ways to avoid lament is to play the blame game. Recently an editorial cartoon came out, poking fun at both the political left and right. It showed a man complaining about President Obama and a woman complaining about President Trump, and at the bottom their complaints were identical: "And 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 to mind first. And not just street drugs or the opioid crisis, but the significant increase in alcohol consumption we see 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 not, to become numb.

But what happens to us and for us when we lament, instead of denying our pain or blaming something or someone 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 wit's end, as the Psalmist put 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 our complaints, we tell the truth of our suffering, we question God's love, we confess our despair, we cry our tears. And we beg. We

beg, and we plead for God to intervene, to act, to have mercy on us, to help us “turn and be healed” as the Prophet Isaiah has put it.

And for God’s part? Well, the testimony of Scripture shows us that God has responded in many and various ways to lamentations. 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 sins, but about what has happened to their society.

Together they fast. They pray. They beg. They return to God.

And they discover, again, in their own time and place that God is “slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,” a God who is eager to leave a blessing behind.

So today, 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 that 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...?” (Joel 2:12, 14).

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