



“Fire, Ash, and Spirit”

Ash Wednesday

Wednesday, February 10, 2016

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17;

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Grace to you and peace, from God who is,
who was, and who is to come. Amen.

In our reading today, we heard the prophet
Joel predicting *the day of the LORD is coming, it
is near*. For Joel, the Day of the Lord was
something . . . different; personal.

Joel looked around him, and he saw how the people had turned away from following Lord God. And he looked around, again, and he saw the plague of locust that had descended on the countryside (in chapter 1). To Joel, the locust were God's wrath set upon them. And lest we think, *Bah, locust, they're just a bunch of grasshoppers, what kind of damage can they do?* This is how W. M Thomson described an 1845 locust plague in Lebanon:

Their number was astounding; the whole face of the mountain was black with them. On they came like a living deluge. We dug trenches, and kindled fires, and beat and burned to death heaps and heaps; but the effort was utterly useless. Wave after wave rolled up the mountainside and poured over

rocks, walls, ditches and hedges - those behind covering up and bridging over the masses already killed. It was perfectly appalling to watch this animated river as it flowed up the road and ascended the hill above my house. For four days they continued to pass on toward the east. . .”

The New Student Bible, p. 918

Thomson went on to write that after they passed, the area looked as though it had been ravaged by a scorching fire. For Joel, that was not only his physical reality: that was his spiritual landscape. He felt that the Day of the Lord, or at the least, the Day of Judgement, had come upon them all. Fire had swept through the country, but he wasn't certain it had cleansed the people.

Joel was looking for that better day. Joel was searching for the time when the people would follow God, sing the Lord's praises, and treat one another with the grace and respect that God calls them to. But they were humans, with all the failings that humans have. After the fire, they had to go through the ash. Once the dross is burned off, they need to be scrubbed clean. The fire was the quick part; the ashes are the part that take time.

Now, when this is happening for Joel and the people, they are well past the exile in Babylon. They've returned to their homeland; rebuilt the temple; got the city up and running. They don't appear to be suffering from some forced, outside, perspective of an occupying

government. Their problems are exactly that: their own problems.

So Joel sees this literal plague of bugs as being sent directly from Lord God because the people have, apparently, simply, totally, slacked off in their worship and following of Lord God. They've gotten comfortable . . . with being comfortable, as they live in their rebuilt city. They've settled down. They are no longer living in tents, sequestered away in internment camps on foreign soil. Now they are sleeping in their own beds, with a roof over their heads, real walls around them, and most - if not all - of their daily needs met.

So just like that time you went to your doctor, who gave you some meds and said take these

for ten days, yet after about four days you started feeling better, and you think, I must be better, I don't need to take these meds anymore, so you stop taking the meds - and then two days later the illness comes back; the people, who had suffered in exile, hundreds of miles from home, were now living in the safety of their homeland, ensconced in their beds, so they don't feel the need to cry out to Lord God any more. They can simply talk to God, whenever, or *if* ever, they feel like it. **That** was the dross - that feeling of *comfort*, that feeling of *safety*, that feeling of *yeah, I believe in God and all that, but I've got stuff to do* - **that** was what Joel felt needed to be burned away.

But just like tarnish will return if you don't polish the brass, the people needed to be continually

cleaned with the ash of repentance, that ash which was left over from the cleansing fire. That ash does more than polish. That ash gives them a physical, visual reminder that we, too, can fall. We can all fall from God, quickly and easily. But did you hear what else Joel had to say?

Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. (2:13)

God is willing to take them back, bring them home, continue to love and (dare we say?) *forgive* the people for their sin.

Yet lest we get too caught up in the ash, in our gospel reading, Jesus reminds us, with his warnings about public prayer and alms giving

by hypocrites, that if we go about striving to polish our tarnish in public; if we attempt to show those around us how humble, repentant, or lowly we are, when we wear sackcloth and ashes (which have long been the visual signs of repentance remorse, mourning) those visual signs can be deceiving, says Christ. Beware those who such things for **show**, for they are doing those things for self, and *Not* for God.

So what are the locust in our lives? What are the locust that eat at our faith, that seek to scorch our beliefs, and leave us a devastated corpse? What is it that gets in the way of your time alone with God? What is it that pulls you from prayer around the dinner the table with people for whom you care? What are the things in your life that may well be the harbingers of the Day of

the Lord for you?

Maybe it's television that sucks your free time from you. Perhaps it's work, your job, your means of employment. It's always there, beseeching you, calling you, pleading with you, "just one more minute; just finish this last, little task, then you won't have to do it tomorrow." Yet that "little" task takes forty-five minutes, and now you're late, and you'll have to drop something from your schedule to get everything done, so that time you planned on reading your devotional has just been changed to praying as you drive, but once you get in the car and that idiot in front of you cuts you off and then slams on his brakes, your mind is now on the other (expletive) drivers around you, and it's not until

you finally get in bed and are just about to nod off that you realize you never did spend that time in faith, so you promise yourself you'll do it in the morning. Maybe **that's** what your locust are.

Maybe the locust in your life are Facebook, or the internet in general, or working out at the gym, or trying that latest recipe. *Whatever* your locust, it doesn't matter; we **all** have locust. We **all** have that fire that lays waste to our lives.

What is most important, though, is how we *deal* with our own locust.

That is where we look once again to Joel.

Return to me with all your heart (2:12)

Simple words; a simple sentiment. Yet one so

Very difficult to do on our own.

We are reminded today that we do not *Have* to deal with locust on our own. The Spirit is here, to help us. God's Spirit is here, to guide us. The Spirit is here, to mark us with ash, to polish our hearts, to bring us home, to the Lord our God.

What we do in public is known - And we get acknowledgment from our fellows. What we do in private is known, to ourselves, and to God. We do receive acknowledgment, for both for the good and for the bad.

Yet let us remember: The fire from God will cleanse us of those locust that seek to devour us; the ash from that fireworks to *polish away* what is left that continues to mess up our

relationship with God. And the Spirit brings us back, brings us home, makes us one once again; with others, and with God.

Amen.

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