

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come. Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and bounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. 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? Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; 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.

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see--we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

An Ash Wednesday Meditation

Where is their God? It is a question asked of old, a question the Israelites faced often. Ancient cultures loved their idols. They loved to carve gods out of wood and stone, presenting them before the crowds as possessing power and mystery, despite having been a tree not too long beforehand. Where is their God, the Israelites would hear, and often they might have no answer, for they knew not where God was. In the exile, in the hunger, in the wilderness, they wandered, they begged, they suffered, and yet they did not find God. The God who spoke through the voice of the prophets, who came in a still, small voice, was not one the ancients wanted to search for. They wanted their gods to be visible, and present, even if this meant they were ineffective. They wanted to place the god upon a stage and bow low before it.

Times change, and yet they stay the same. Our God is still difficult to pin down. God came to us in a manger, God left behind an empty tomb with nothing but a burial cloth as evidence of his departure. God ascended into heaven, and ever since God sends the Holy Spirit to be with us, to guide and support us. Except the Holy Spirit no longer appears in tongues of fire over our heads, coming in a loud, rushing wind. The Spirit speaks to our hearts, and yet that voice is so difficult to hear amidst the clamor of everyday life. We still have our gods that pull our worship away from worshipping the one true god, and while they are not carved of wood and stone, they are no less distracting than they were to the ancients.

The prophet Joel tells us to be ready, to prepare for the coming of the Lord. We are called to sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, and gather the people. The Lord is coming, in darkness and clouds, and we are to be ready. In 2nd Corinthians we hear the same message: Prepare for the Lord. Through knowledge and patience, kindness and genuine love, we are to make ready, for the Lord will come.

Today we begin a new season, a new journey. We have traveled this way before, but not like this, not in the situation we are in now, not in the group we have now. This is a new time, and yet the message is the same. Prepare for the coming of the Lord. We have forty days in which we are to examine our

lives, examining our habits, poring over ourselves to find the weak spots and the holes, those places where the cloth has worn a little thin and could use a patch, some TLC. We are to spend our time wisely, investing it in prayer and devotion, offering ourselves up to God so that we might hear the words God is speaking to us here, now.

I went to the doctor today to get a physical. When I scheduled my appointment for 1:30 in the afternoon, I didn't realize I would be asked to fast in order to have my blood taken. I did not enjoy waking up this morning knowing it would be over seven hours until I had the chance to eat. Fasting is a discipline, but not one I enjoy, nor one I would recommend. However, there are some others I do enjoy, and I might recommend them.

Take some time with the Bible every day. Read it, and think about what you're reading. There are some difficult words in there, ones we could spend the rest of our lives contemplating and never understand.

Pray. Daily. More often if you get the chance. Even if it's just to say hello. It's tough to hear the voice of God if we're not taking the time to have our part in the conversation.

Take some time to just be quiet. The Psalmist writes, "Be still and know that I am God." Only by closing off the noise and distractions will we be able to tune our ears to hear the Spirit whispering to our hearts.

It can be difficult discovering what message God is speaking to us. It is impossible if we don't create time to try and discover that, and even if we do take the time, we can still feel as though we are just missing the message. We must remember it is a long journey through this wilderness, and no one said it would be easy. To reach the empty tomb Jesus first had to mount the cross and make the ultimate sacrifice, and yet because he has done so we know the promise of the empty tomb awaits. But we cannot rush there; first we must linger awhile in the wilderness, hearing the words from 2nd Corinthians echoing in our hearts: We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.