

# Ash Wednesday 2016

## Repentance to Redemption

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Jacksonville, OR  
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*"Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning." (Joel 2:12)*

Believe it or not these words we hear this Ash Wednesday are here to provide comfort. They are a comfort because of what came before in the previous chapter. Whenever we encounter the word 'therefore' in the scriptures we must look back and find out...what its 'there for'. Without this understanding we would miss out on what it is our scripture reading for today is trying to tell us. So, in order to gain this understanding we must go back a chapter and see what the Lord is doing in the life of the prophet Joel. And I think in the end will understand more fully the intentions of a fierce God...who loves us very much.

In the beginning of the book of Joel we see Joel relaying the Word of God... and the message is not one that would put a smile on your face. It may even be considered a message where all hope could be lost. *"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."* Doesn't sound like much could be left, if anything. But, we all know we are not talking about vegetation here.

What we really see going on is a denial or turning away from the covenant of God. The people are being led away from their relationship with their God, increment by increment, to pursue the ways of the other nations and worldly inclinations. We have all heard the obvious truth that everything goes from 'order' to 'disorder'; this is why car maintenance is so important☺. But, when it comes to our relationship with God, worldly vices and desires go a step further and try to destroy that relationship in a more proactive way. Remember the Garden...the serpent said, *"did God say"*...the enemy casts doubt and slowly chips

away at our faith plying to reduce our hopes to a dream that can be forgotten.

Then the Lord tells Joel of the corrupter, *“He hath laid my vine waste, and barked my fig tree: he hath made it clean bare, and cast it away...”* And it gets worse! *“The seed is rotten under their clods, the garners are laid desolate, the barns are broken down; for the corn is withered. How do the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed, because they have no pasture; yea, the flocks of sheep are made desolate.”*

Such a sad state...and Joel is brought to tears; following this path we have no hope and we become scattered like sheep that have no shepherd. And Joel continues, *“O Lord, to thee will I cry: for the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and the flame hath burned all the trees of the field.”* Joel lets us know that in this state of mankind all is dried up and burned...nothing will be left. Joel is exhorted to mourn...will all be lost? Is life just a cruel joke? Is there is no way out...is there is no expectation beyond this world...this existence? I am so glad Joel continues! We are not left in hopelessness!

Joel starts were we all should this first day of Lent...in mourning. We have fallen short of the glory of God. All that we are is dependent on Him. Without Him there is no life...and left to our own devices...it would be even worse. But...the Son shines in the darkness that binds man's heart, and life begins anew. Like Joel, our mourning calls us to repentance and repentance opens our eyes to the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. There is a way out of our miserable state! And we are told how; *“Rend your heart and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful...”* This Lent, don't make a show of your sacrifice...don't rend your garments where all can see. But focus on Christ and change your heart. *“For who knoweth, Joel continues, if He will return and repent, and leave a blessing...”*

The ashes that will be placed on your foreheads today (tonight) will be an outward expression of the internal grace of forgiveness, but forgiveness only comes when our hearts are truly involved. We can put on a show and tear our garments in an outward show of obedience, we can stress to others how put out we are by what we have given up for the sake of Christ...but in this attitude can we be sure that what we have given up is truly in the spirit of

penitence? True penitence comes from within and is a private affair between you and your Lord. St. Matthew reminds us:

*“But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”* (Matthew 6:17-18)

Our Lenten sacrifices are between our Lord and ourselves. Make no show in your offering. Let the way you lead your life be your Christian example...giving up the ways of world for the glory of God. Go in peace; give thyself in the service of your Lord. May this lent be a truly internal experience and may you be a witness above the crowd to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. Amen.