



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Ash Wednesday: When You Fast

Joel 2:12-17 &  
St. Matthew 6:16-21

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February 14, 2024

The Lord spoke to Judah through the prophet Joel as the land was being scoured clean by a devastating plague of locusts. We don't know exactly when this happened, only that it was probably some time after Judah's return from exile in Babylon. We get a sense of the severity of the plague in the first chapter, where we read that the locusts have consumed even the vines and stripped the fig trees of their bark. Vines and tree bark are not normal locust food. They're what locusts would turn to once everything else had been consumed. The vine and the fig tree were symbols of peace and prosperity and their consumption by locusts tells us just how desperate the situation was. As Joel 1:13 notes, the priests lamented before the altar for there was neither grain nor drink left in the land to offer to the Lord.

Over and over the prophet speaks of the Day of the Lord, a day to which Israel looked with eager anticipation. One day the Lord would arise from his throne, he who had tamed chaos to create an ordered cosmos for human flourishing, and he would do the same again. The Lord would arise to bring justice to his people and to set all to rights. But Israel's perspective—how she saw herself in relation to the Day of the Lord—it was off. Because Israel always saw herself as the innocent victim. On the Day of the Lord her enemies would be vanquished and she would be vindicated. In those days, in Israel, it occurred to very few people that the Day of the Lord might turn out to be a judgement on Israel's own sins. This gets at the heart of Joel's prophecy.

The Day of the Lord has come and his own people have found themselves the focus of his judgement.

The book is a call to repentance. Judah stands condemned for having offered the outward sacrifices of grain, wine, and oil, while the people had not truly dedicated their hearts to the Lord. But Joel reminds the people that this is not the end. The purpose of the Lord's discipline is to bring repentance and with repentance will come restoration. It's a theme we see over and over in Scripture. "Even now," declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart... Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster" (vv. 12-13).

Now, this does not mean that the outward trappings of religion and of repentance are unnecessary. Through the prophet the Lord summons his people to fast, to weep, to mourn—but to do all of that from the heart and as evidence of true repentance. In case they are tempted to make a show of rending their garments, the Lord declares it is more important that they first rend their hearts.

But this isn't just about the individual. He stresses the need for *corporate* repentance, too. The priests are to take their place "between the vestibule and the altar" to weep and cry out for mercy while the entire nation joins them: the elders and the children—even the bride and bridegroom are to suspend their honeymoon so that the whole nation can take part in this corporate act of repentance.

In response to the honest repentance of the nation, the Lord promises restoration—even that one day he will solve Israel's heart problem by pouring out his Spirit. In that day he will establish his people forever and put an end to their enemies. Just as we begin Lent, our Epistle points us ahead to Easter and on the age to come that burst forth from the empty tomb. Even as we're reminded by the old

Israel of the importance of penitence, both as individuals and corporately as the Church, we're also reminded that we are *not* the old Israel; we are the *new* Israel, we are the people who live on the other side of the Lord's promise to pour out his Spirit.

And if we turn over to today's Gospel we see Jesus addressing the same old problem. Many in Israel continued to put on a show of outward piety, while their hearts were far from the Lord. Jesus warns that those who put on a show for others have received all they will ever receive for their efforts. They may receive respect and honour from those around them, but it has not moved God. Think again of the Day of the Lord, that day when the people of Israel anticipated the Lord coming to defeat their enemies, to set all to rights, and to reign forever. Many people fasted and made public acts of repentance in anticipation of that day. Jesus' warning in light of that should have been frightening. As the Messiah, he was setting in motion the events that would culminate in the Day of the Lord and here he warns that those who have made an insincere show of repentance will have no share in that day—or, to be more specific, they will, but they will have a share in the Lord's judgement, not his deliverance. Instead, it'll be those who, to use the language of Joel, have rent their hearts rather than their garments, whom the Father will see and reward—they are the ones who will know the age to come.

Let your investment be in the age to come, Jesus exhorts the people. Investment in the things of this age will not last. Moth and rust corrupt and thieves break in and steal. More importantly, our investments in the values and systems of the present evil age are foolish in light of the resurrection of Jesus. He has inaugurated the age to come. That's the future. Think of our Epistle from this past Sunday, from 1 Corinthians 13—St. Paul's chapter about love. If even the good, God-given gifts of tongues and prophecy will one day

cease to have a purpose when the age to come has been consummated—when God’s future finally arrives—how much more ought we to hold lightly to the praises of others and to investment in the values, systems, and institutions of the age that is passing away. Instead, Jesus encourages his people to lay up treasures in heaven—in God’s future where are promised inheritance lies, in his new creation. Jesus has healed the breach between heaven and earth that was caused by our sin and rebellion. One day heaven and earth will be rejoined. One day, as the Jews had always hoped, all will be set to rights and evil wiped from the face of the earth. Redeemed humanity will live in the presence of God. It is that dawning age into which we ought to be investing, knowing that what we do out of love for God and love for each other in this age is what will last into the age to come.

Israel struggled with repentance and so did the people surrounding Jesus. They lived in anticipation of the fulfilment of the Lord’s promise to pour out his Spirit and to set right the hearts of his people. There is, in light of that, an important difference between our season of penitence and theirs. We live on the fulfilment side of the Lord’s promise. We are the people redeemed by Jesus at the cross and in whom the Spirit of God dwells—and that has changed everything. Nevertheless, we too live in anticipation of the day when all will finally be set to rights and so it is just as important for us to set our eyes on Jesus and to commit ourselves to investing in the thing of his kingdom.

Brothers and Sisters, this is the purpose of our Lenten fast. Each year the Church calls us to slow down, to take a break, and to fast so that we can, for at least these few weeks, invest some time that we wouldn’t normally invest in considering God’s word, in considering the gospel, in considering what Jesus has done for us by his death and resurrection, to think on God’s love for us revealed in Jesus,

and to make a point of being deliberate about our love for each other and, especially for the poor and needy, so that as we approach Easter, we will have our eyes more firmly set on Jesus and the new life and the new creation that lie before us.

Let’s pray: Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.