**Ash Wednesday**

**March 2, 2022**

**Text—Joel 2:12-19**

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. Today, we begin a journey of reflection, repentance, and remembrance of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and his suffering and death on the cross. Today we also start up again our midweek series on the Minor Prophets with one of the appointed texts for Ash Wednesday: our Old Testament lesson from Joel 2. There’s a reason why this text is the appointed one for Ash Wednesday every year: because it encapsulates the message of Lent in just a few verses. God tells his people, who have sinned against him, to return to him, and promises that he will show them mercy. No matter what their sins have been, no matter what other gods they have worshiped, if they repent and turn back to him alone, then he will forgive them and continue to bless them as his people. Ultimately, this is the basic teaching of Lent, one that we Christians should remember not just during this season, but at all times of our lives.

But before we begin to examine this text in more detail, we need to take a look at the book of Joel in its entirety. It is unclear exactly when the prophet Joel’s ministry took place, but it would have been sometime during the era of the divided kingdom, after David and Solomon’s kingdom had separated into two, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Because Joel mentions Judah and Jerusalem several times in the book, it is more likely that he lived and preached in the southern kingdom. Regardless of exactly when or where Joel preached, it is clear that his ministry occurred during a time of great sin and unbelief among God’s people. The people of Israel had largely forsaken the Lord their God who had led them out of Egypt and gone after the gods of their pagan neighbors. They had adopted the detestable practices of those other nations, including widespread sexual immorality, oppression of the poor, and even child sacrifice. Thus, God punished the people for their sinful and idolatrous practices. The first chapter of Joel describes how God sent a plague of locusts upon his people, mirroring one of the Ten Plagues that he had subjected Egypt to. Locusts are not to be confused with grasshoppers or cicadas; they aren’t just annoying bugs that make loud noises and shed their exoskeletons. Locusts are extremely destructive insects that can ruin entire crops and seriously endanger the food supply, especially when people lack the means to anticipate them or drive them off. That was certainly the case in ancient Judah, and so the plague of locusts would have devastated the fields there and put the people in danger of starvation.

In response to these locusts, Joel urged the people to put on sackcloth and ashes, to mourn and repent before the Lord. This calamity was their fault; it had come upon them because of their own sins. Thus, the only way to fix the problem was to forsake the idols they had been worshiping, end the detestable practices among them, and return to the Lord their God. Failure to do so would mean swift destruction, as they would not be able to survive long with no food.

But the messages of gloom and doom did not end there. Joel also prophesied to the people about another swarming plague that would soon be coming upon them, but not a plague of locusts this time. Rather, Joel proclaimed that God would raise up a nation of humans, a people that every other nation on earth would be afraid of. The armies of this nation would lay waste to their enemies and conquer them all, and no one would be able to stand before them. Like the locusts, these people would consume everything in their path, leaving nothing for the people of God who had sinned so greatly. In hindsight, we now know that these oracles referred to the great armies of Assyria and Babylon, which defeated both Israel and Judah and sent their people into exile. At the time of Joel’s ministry, these events were years, perhaps even centuries away, and so the invading armies were just a vague threat on the horizon. But the people of Judah had received a significant taste of the devastation these empires would bring as they endured the plague of locusts. God wanted them to learn from this experience and repent before things got even worse for them. The locusts were bad enough, but the Assyrians and Babylonians would be infinitely worse.

Unfortunately, as we all know, the people of Israel and Judah did not repent of their sins. They continued down their path of idolatry and rejection of the Lord their God, and so God did exactly what he told them he would do. He raised up the foreign armies who swarmed to the Promised Land and devastated everything in their path, including his rebellious people. They did not heed his warnings, and so they paid a heavy price. But could it all have been avoided? What if they had listened and turned aside from their wicked ways? Would God have been merciful to them then? The answer, of course, is a resounding yes! Look again at our Old Testament text for today. Through Joel, God promises his people that he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting over disaster. His judgment and wrath were not permanent; they could be stayed if the people returned to him and pleaded with him for help. He would make the locusts go away, and he would defeat the armies of his people’s enemies. If they returned to him, he would return to them, and he would deal with them kindly and generously as he had promised. God had made a covenant with their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to bless them and their descendants forever, and he was not about to go back on that promise. His grace was always there for the Israelites when they sought it, and he would always forgive the sins of the repentant. So he encouraged the people to be sorry for their sins, to fast, weep, and mourn, to appropriately express their grief over their misdeeds. God would not reject their repentant and contrite hearts, and they could be confident that he would restore their fortunes if they simply returned to him.

Well, as I said at the beginning of this sermon, this message is one that we Christians today also need to hear. No, we are not being threatened by a plague of locusts. No, it is highly unlikely that an invading empire will conquer us and send us into exile. What we face is much worse than that. We, along with all other people in this world, have sinned against the Lord who created all things and holds us all to account. We have not obeyed his Law as we should. We have not honored him or his name as we should. We have not made our worship of him the number one priority in our lives. We have harmed our neighbors in various ways. We have committed sexual immorality in our thoughts and actions. We have taken things that do not belong to us. We have spread rumors and spoken viciously against our neighbors. We have coveted things that do not belong to us. And we know that the penalty for these sins is death and destruction. Like the people of ancient Judah, we are subject to the wrath of God for our sins against him and against our neighbor. He threatens to condemn all who disobey him to hell. If he treated his own people of Israel who had sinned against him so harshly, how can we expect that he will do anything different for us?

But also as he did for his people of Israel, God offers us grace and forgiveness for our sins. He invites us to return to him just as he did for his people of old. Except as Christians, we have an even greater reason to believe that God will forgive us. We know that God sent his Son Jesus Christ to serve as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. He came to earth and lived the perfect life that we in a million years could never have lived. He never sinned against his Father or against anyone else one time; he never broke the Law once. And it was his perfection and righteousness that enabled him to sacrifice himself to save all of us. He willingly submitted to rejection by his own people, abuse at the hands of the authorities, and a painful and shameful execution on a cross. But the worst part about it was that Jesus was forced to endure the entire wrath of God against the sins of the world. While he hung there on that cross, the Father turned his back on him, so that he literally suffered hell as he was dying. It was the absolute worst experience anyone has ever been through. That’s what our sins deserve, and that’s why Jesus had to endure it.

But in enduring it, Jesus was taking the just punishment for sin so that we human beings would not experience it ourselves. Now that Jesus has suffered and died in our place, we no longer need to fear that fate. Jesus substituted himself for us, so that we who believe in him will not be punished as our sins deserve. Rather, we have been forgiven for our sins and now have the promise of everlasting life in God’s kingdom. It doesn’t matter what kinds of sins we may have committed in the past, what matters is that we, as Joel says, return to the Lord our God, for he is indeed gracious and merciful. Whenever we repent of our sins and trust in him to forgive us, he always does so for the sake of his Son Jesus. The people of Israel and Judah did not listen to God’s call to repentance, and they paid a heavy price for their lack of faith. We, however, have the opportunity to respond differently, to heed God’s call by repenting and believing the Gospel. In so doing, we will be trusting in his promise to forgive our sins and grant us eternal life. We know that God’s Word is always true, and if he promises us forgiveness, life, and salvation through his Son Jesus Christ, we can believe that promise wholeheartedly.

During this season of Lent, we will continue to hear these messages of Law and Gospel. We will hear that we are sinners who deserve nothing but punishment from God, but also that God has punished his Son in our stead and granted us forgiveness for our sins. We will hear over and over again Joel’s message from our text: “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” That’s how God was for the people of ancient Israel, and he is even more so now that his Son Jesus has come. Those promises that he spoke to his people of old are for you as well, and he will always forgive your sins when you repent and turn to him for mercy. So do as the text says: turn away from sin and embrace the grace and forgiveness that God offers to you in Christ. No matter how sinful you may be, his mercy covers all of those sins, and he will never reject the repentant prayers of his faithful people. Amen.