

Here we are again. Walking around the same circle once more. Ash Wednesday, Lent. Tonight we have the same service as we did a year ago. We pray mostly the same prayers, sing the same hymns. Vow renewed love and devotion and service to God. All because the calendar says, Feb. 8.

How different this worship would be were we brought here not by a calendar but a crisis. Were at this very moment missiles armed with nuclear warheads climbing out of their silos to do their deed of death and destruction, how much more intense would be our prayers. ~~Were some drought~~ Were drought long and harsh, emptying the shelves of the supermarkets, and our stomachs how much more sincere would be our vows. Were some plague taking the lives of our family and friends daily, our pleadings to our Lord would rise up from the very depths of our being.

As it was in the time of Joel, in Israel. The land lay devastated. Locusts had descended, like an army stripping the land. Joel wrote, "The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but after them a desolate wilderness, and ~~nothing~~ nothing escapes them. The storehouses are desolate, the granaries are ruined, because the grain has failed. How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them, even the flocks of the sheep are dismayed.

To this people God spoke and said, Return not even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Who knows whether he will not turn and repent and leave a blessing behind him.

The prophet called a fast, from young to old they responded. And we read, Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people and said, "Behold I am sending to you grain and wind and oil, and you will be satisfied and I will not more make you a reproach among the nations.

Now I suppose were the right preacher in this pulpit, he might be able to whip us all into a frenzy of repentance. Certainly there are enough ominous

signs on the horizon to scare any reasonable person. All around us we see the debris and wreckage of our sin: The atmosphere of our world has been damaged, the sun's light burns through hotter harsher, hotter. ^{cause of global warming, that was not} The atmosphere of our homes has become polluted also with words of anger, condemnation, children disobedient, parents irresponsible. Any moment the Russians may push the button, or we ourselves, and ~~the~~ every important appointment and every thing that we ~~scrimp~~ scrimped and saved for and we ourselves, ashes. If not the Russians, then crack dealers, or debt piled upon debt, everywhere there are threats that will bring destruction. We need a crisis to repent this Lent, well, we have crises in abundance.

But this Lent it is not crises which God has called me to preach, but Christ. For each of us the crucial issues is not how we will handle debt or drought or drugs, but whether our hearts are fixed and focused on our Lord. For our God comes not with locusts and threats, but ~~with~~ with his son, not with a fist raised in anger, but with arms opened for reconciliation, embrace.

As Paul wrote: We beseech you on behalf ~~of~~ of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Christ, who was ~~not~~ in no way estranged from God, took the place, the punishment of the estranged ones. We ^{have walked} ~~are caught~~ caught in the trap of sin, he allowed the crushing jaws of that trap to close around him. He took the ~~burden~~ burden of our sin, carried it on the cross, that we might be right with God.

Paul writes: Working together with him, then we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation." Behold now ~~is~~ the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation.

Now. At this moment God has opened his arms to you, to each of us. In every moment in Christ God has opened his arms. Will we let go of our sin and guilt? Will we turn away from our fears? Will we take our eyes off of every

Will we turn to Christ

glittering false hope and empty dream? Now is the time to receive the embrace of God, in Jesus Christ. Be reconciled to God in Christ.

Ash Wednesday. The words may be the same, the hymns sung with the same tunes. But in Jesus Christ, God is reconciling the world to himself, and not simply the world, but also you. In Christ sin and death and the power of Satan are put behind you, and you are new. This day. Now.