

Joel 2:11-19

Ash Wednesday

March 4, 1987

A part of me says, "It's all too horrible to have ever happened, but as we are hearing the words of witnesses and victims, ~~and victims~~, we are reminded that it did. Evil was unleashed against Jews and gypsies and any who would protest. Unspeakable evil.

Where were the good people? People like you and I. Why didn't they stop it?

These days I've been wondering how I will answer my grandchildren when they ask me that same question, forty years from now.

Grandpa, you were alive during the years from the 1950's to the 90's when the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. You were preaching during the years when farmers grew too much food, and poor people were hungrier and hungrier. ~~and~~ What did you say?

Grandpa, you were alive when sexual promiscuity threatened with the spread of disease and the breakdown of the family.

Grandpa, you were voting when the prosperity of the future, our lives, ~~was~~ was mortgaged for the ease and comfort and military security of the present moment. Grandpa, what did you say and do?

Grandchildren, your grandpa was busy building up churches. I was preaching sermons that people wanted to hear. I spoke of faith, and hope, and forgiveness. I guess I didn't have much time for the poor, I felt bad about that, but I never knew what to do for them. Anyway I was too busy to write letters to my congressmen, and I didn't want to seem like an old fuddy-
~~daddy~~ ^{dad} so I seldom spoke about ~~saxualityx~~ God and our sexual practice.

But Grandpa, what about all the rest?

Well, we were all pretty much the same, feeling helpless in a world that was changing faster than we even knew. So we gave up and settled for trying to be happy, and enjoy ourselves the most that we could, and not saying or doing anything that would offend anyone. I'm sorry.

Yet 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.

Yet, even now return to me.

The future is now carved in stone. That is what these words ^{imply} ^{There is just time} History does not have to make us, we can make history. Because yesterday we were selfish and self-centered, that does not mean tomorrow we must be.

Through Joel, God speaks these words to us:

Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil. Who know whether he will not turn and repent?

For ~~the~~ Joel the question was the day of the Lord, the day of God's wrath and judgement which he saw on the horizon. The judgement would be terrible, but Joel called the people to a new beginning in the hope that God would ~~repent~~ spare his people.

Each day God grants to us, his church the possibility of a new beginning. Sure it is easiest to simply continue into tomorrow as we have gone ^{though} yesterday. A boulder rolling down a hill has a momentum of its own; just letting it roll is the easiest course. So our lives individually and our life together are like that boulder, yesterday rolling along into tomorrow. But this day God ^{Return} says, ~~Repent~~. Bring that boulder to a stop. Then begin it again in a new direction, the right direction. ~~Repent~~ Return.

God has given his Son to make all things new. Me and you and this world. God could have let the boulder roll, he could have said, I have given the world my law, let them be judged by that. People will live and people will die. And when All is said and done I will skim the cream off the top. Moses and Elijah, David, Josiah. Ruth and Naomi, and countless more women and men.

But God said no. I want more. I want the poor and the weak and the broken and the crushed. ^{alive} I want all those dimly burning wicks. And so God sent his son in love for all the world. And now he has made us his the body of his Son to claim in this year, this world for our Lord.

This day, then, return, people of God. Let the love of God be a fire in

you, burning up ^{and} fear and ~~burning~~ ^{warming} you with courage. Let him make of you the generous, giving, joyful, faithful people that he has called you to be.
Return to the Lord, your God.

Lent

Today begins Lent. For us this ~~isnt~~ ^{is} may be like every other, a time to pray a little more, think of God a little more, possibly a time to sacrifice this or that.

Or for us it may be a time of beginning, a time of continually setting our lives in the direction that God would have us go.

I know this, I do not want to sit before my grandchildren in forty years, in sorrow and ~~sake~~ shame. Instead I hope that I can declare, in faith and love we followed where our Lord led. The way was not always easy, but our Lord gave us strength and courage to follow ~~him~~ ^{him}.