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Ash Wednesday, March 2, 2022
Year C

First Reading: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Gospel Reading: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Sermon Title: “*Treasures in Heaven*”

Theme

On Ash Wednesday we begin our forty-day journey toward Easter with a day of fasting and repentance. Marking our foreheads with dust, we acknowledge that we die and return to the earth. At the same time, the dust traces the life-giving cross indelibly marked on our foreheads at baptism. While we journey through Lent to return to God, we have already been reconciled to God through Christ. We humbly pray for God to make our hearts clean while we rejoice that “now is the day of salvation.” Returning to our baptismal call, we more intentionally bear the fruits of mercy and justice in the world.

Texts:

First Reading: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

¹Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
²a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.

¹²Yet even now, says the LORD,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
 ¹³rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.

¹⁴Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD, your God?

¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;

call a solemn assembly;

¹⁶gather the people.

Sanctify the congregation;

assemble the aged;

gather the children,

even infants at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.

¹⁷Between the vestibule and the altar

let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.

Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.

Why should it be said among the peoples,
‘Where is their God?’ ”

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10

^{20b}We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{6:1}As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights,

hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Sermon

A story is told about a very wealthy man who loved his wealth so much that he put it in his will that he was to be buried with his money. When he died, his widow wrote a check for his net worth and put it in his hand as the casket was closed.

The passage that is our Gospel Reading for this Ash Wednesday comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which begins in chapter 5 and runs through chapter 7. So this passage we have is only one small part of what he said that day, and it comes nearer to the beginning of his public ministry than the end. So even though this is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the solemn liturgical season of Lent, Christendom has applied it to the beginning of our 40 Days of Lent, that we at Zion have entitled "*Help in the Desert*". And the help begins right away, in the readings for Ash Wednesday.

The First Reading from Joel is a trumpet blast. In a time before modern forms of communication, a trumpet was blown in several patterns that signified what commanders wanted their troops to do. They woke with reveille, went to bed with taps, and on the battlefield tunes ordered charge or retreat.

Joel calls for the trumpet to blast to warn Judah, the only surviving nation of Israel, that the LORD is coming. And while that probably doesn't cause a stir among us, it should, because we have never been closer to the LORD's return than we are right now. And one of our biggest problems as 21st century Christians is, same as Advent, we don't expect him to return this Advent, this Lent, even this year – but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be ready. And today's texts are all about being ready and give us practical instruction for what getting ready looks like.

In verses 15ff, Joel shouts,

¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,

That is what we did a few moments ago. We called a solemn assembly. We gathered the people. By our humble and repentant presence here, we sanctified the congregation. By our confession, we are reconciled to God. By our request for mercy, we do not cheapen God's grace but accept it as treasure. By our marks of humility, we have made ourselves ready for our journey through Lent where we walk alongside Jesus who will be more and more alone until his naked and battered body is nailed to the cross. Today, we wear the cross of Christ on our foreheads or backsides of our hands as a public and visible symbol that tells everyone that we stand in unity with Jesus, knowing that we could never do what he did.

The story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his Passion including his crucifixion is sad, and more than sad, it is gut-wrenching, because we know that we are the reason for his Passion, we are the real guilty ones. But we also know how the story turns out, so we have hope, "Hope in the Desert."

I hope in reading the Gospel Reading I did not present Christ as angry. Certainly, at this point in his ministry, he was not. There were the few times he seemed to have gotten angry, but when he delivered his Sermon on the Mount, he had just started his public ministry and was trying to get people to listen to him so that he could teach them about their roles as God-seekers.

Although all we have is the written word, I hope what I transmitted was the true compassion of the LORD. The Jews had been led astray for so long by the religious professionals that Jesus wanted to bring to light what it looked like to live out genuine discipleship.

In this passage, he focused on acts of piety, and that is fitting because acts of piety are what Christendom has traditionally focused on during Lent. Although we should always practice acts of our genuine piety, Lent is a good time to start or restart our acts of piety. Lent is a good time to turn away from sin and turn toward God.

Jesus said, ¹"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." We are to be humble and private about our piety.

We are to be private about our acts of charity. More specifically, Jesus said we should give alms, money to the poor, "in secret" so that our "Father who sees in secret will reward" us. To be clear, we are generous because God revealed in Jesus Christ was first generous to us. We love others, even strangers, and share in their suffering because that is what Christ has done for us. To be clear, the reward in heaven that Jesus spoke of is not because of our living according to his example because all of us have fallen short. Our reward in heaven is another example of God's grace, and because we have hope that it is ours, we try to live according to his example.

We are also to pray in private because that is where the true us resides. Have you ever been to a banquet and someone is asked to pray and they get lost in trying to make up for all the times they haven't prayed? They pray for

- those in prison,
- and for refugees,
- and for those children with swollen bellies and the puppies cowering in the back of cages in shelters they've seen in commercials,
- they pray for justice and peace in the world

and all of this is right and good, but brother, the fried chicken is getting cold. There is a more appropriate time for all those concerns we truly have, and it is in our personal devotional time because then God sees the integrity of our concern.

Some fast from certain foods during Lent. One gives up caffeine, another gives up chocolate, another television, or the cell phone. You do it if you are convinced that is a genuine act of self-giving. But then complete the act by taking the money you would have spent, and give it to the poor. Take the time you would have spent watching television or scrolling on your phone and use it to read your Bible or pray for others.

And finally, we get to the one issue that probably bothers us more than all the others, the issue of earthly treasures. Jesus taught that we focus on the wrong things in life. We get so caught up in our treasures, wealth, and possessions. They might be our 401K, our investments, our property, especially those extraordinary things we have just because we can. When we lay up treasures on earth, we can see them,

touch them. We may say, "I'm not attached to those things. I could let them go." Well, then, Lent is a good time to practice that.

There is nothing inherently wrong with them – until we make them more important than our spiritual well-being. And Jesus reminded us that they can all be taken from us – by thieves, or the stock market, or by our own bad decisions. And while that may not happen to us, one day they will be taken from us by death. Like the wealthy man I told you about in the story I started with, we cannot take it with us. Someone once commented that they never saw a hearse pulling a U-Haul.

Jesus taught a better way. He said, "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

There is nothing wrong with being a good steward, but Jesus taught that being a good steward includes generosity to our neighbors. God in Christ will not be impressed by the size of our bank accounts, but he will be interested in the size of our heart accounts.

Commit today to devote yourself to listening to Jesus more intently, through weekend worship, daily devotions, midweek programs, that are all intended to give us hope in the desert.

Prayer

Gracious God, out of your love and mercy you breathed into dust the breath of life, creating us to serve you and our neighbors. Call forth our prayers and acts of kindness, and strengthen us to face our mortality with confidence in the mercy of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen