

Ash Wednesday

February 6, 2008

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly”

By this morning/afternoon/evening, there has been a lot of trumpeting, though of a different sort than that called for by the prophet Joel. We have come through the fanfare of the Super Bowl, heard the party horns of Mardi Gras, the trumpeting of candidates running for the presidential nomination, the endless spinning of voting results by the campaigns, not to mention the incessant commentary by pundits on tv and radio.

While there are fewer candidates’ voices calling for our allegiance now than when it all began, their message has stayed remarkably similar, and constant. Someone behind each of these campaigns has tested the air pretty well. All have picked up on the deep and wide-spread anxiety in our country—about the future course of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, more recently about the economy, and anxiety about the effect of all of this on our nation’s standing with the rest of the world. So all the candidates promise CHANGE. And, Lord knows, we need some change to get ourselves out of the fixes we are in.

Everyone knows that no one can *know* what challenges and crises will arrive for a new administration, or what kind of change will be possible. So all the candidates also aim to address that underlying uncertainty, by reassuring us that *they* are solid, trustworthy and wise. All try to convince us that whatever challenges or crisis may arise, *they* will know what to do because of their own particular life *experience*, or proven *good judgment*.

With these questions and concerns on our minds, for the direction of the nation, the world and our own lives, we gather today for a different kind of assembly, looking to *another* for the change and security we long for. Ours is not a rally or post-election celebration. We gather to join in *lament*, together, as one body, without regard to politics, party, or favored candidate. We come to offer our common confession and repentance to God, for ourselves and on behalf of the world.

We do this against the backdrop of our own historical and personal circumstances, of course, but our sorrow for the ways that we as individuals, as a Church, and as nations and peoples have injured one another and

dishonored the Lord has been shared by every generation before ours. It is shared today by millions of people around the globe who gather as we do. We make our public outcry for the sorry state of the world and our souls.

What we do here today is nothing new. We come to confess that we have too often forgotten who we are and whose we are. We have disregarded the dignity and needs of our neighbors, to feed our own appetites, instead. We have not put our whole trust in God, and have tried instead to make our own future secure *by* ourselves, and *for* ourselves. We have hurt not only ourselves by this, but also our neighbors; and we have wounded the heart of the God and Father of us all.

We need this season of repentance, of turning and re-turning again. Confession and repentance are the gifts of a gracious God. While *we* may, and do forget, *God* remembers that we are but dust—feeble, finite, and fickle.

We are of the earth, and to the earth we will all return. But the ashes of this day are not merely a reminder that life is short and we are condemned to die. “That might be good stoicism,” Thomas Merton observed, “but it is not Christianity.” “The cross, with which the ashes are traced on us [today], is the sign of Christ’s victory over death.”¹

By his cross all has been redeemed and transformed, even what is most broken and amiss in us and in the world, even what has turned to ashes and dust. All is redeemed and transformed not by our efforts, though we must make them, as we must participate responsibly in the political process. All is redeemed and transformed by the unfathomable love of God in Jesus, the Christ.

The season of Lent that we enter today is a gift, a gift of time and opportunity to step back from habits of self-concern and self-sufficiency, to turn and re-turn toward God and our neighbor. In the rhythm of the community of faith, we have come round again to a season to contemplate with deep wonder the meaning of that reconciling love.

¹Thomas Merton, from Seasons of Celebration, quoted in A Lent Sourcebook I (Liturgy Training Publications, 1990), p. 18.

The signs of this season are fasting, giving alms, and prayer. We fast from indulging our appetites, so cleverly and persistently wooed and seduced by our “consumer society,” and to repent of our complicity with that consumerism. We give alms to loosen our grip on money and possessions that would hold us in their grip, and to calm our appetite for more. Our fasting and alms giving are sustained by prayer. We make our small sacrifice for love of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who is always with us and for us, waiting for us to be with and for God and our brothers and sisters.

We undertake a Lenten discipline not to improve ourselves, and not to impress others (or ourselves) with our piety, but as a sign of our consent and confidence that God will be active, in and among us, to transform our hearts and bring about the change we and the world so deeply need. We undertake a Lenten discipline in confidence that the Spirit will equip us to be more faithful witnesses and agents of Christ’s transforming and redeeming love.

The One who is faithful will do this. The same One whose experience of being in relationship with humankind goes back to the very beginning. The same One whose self-giving love forever changed that relationship, who has reconciled us to himself in Christ. It is God who makes all things new, who even now is restoring all things and all people to the glory for which they were created.