

Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

The Office of the Bishop of the Southeastern Iowa Synod, to which Bethany is joined to with over one-hundred congregations, is offering a daily devotional throughout the season of Lent. If you would like to sign-up visit the Synod website (<https://seiasynod.org/>). The first of those devotions hit my inbox earlier this morning as I was contemplating tonight's sermon and it was a gift, which helped center my mind that had been swirling in a sea of four phenomenal Bible passages set before us this evening. The words from Pastor Erika Uthe, Assistant to the Bishop, assisted in returning me to the promise spoken by the prophet Joel.

Joel 2.13

*Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.*

Her devotion is a wonderful entry point into the season of Lent the church embarks upon tonight and so I share that with you now.

Ash Wednesday is a stark reality of the condition all creation bears, in that everything is finite. There is a beginning, and an end: death. Perhaps this reality is even more stark as we watch and witness scenes from war, people fleeing home and family, death, fear, and destruction. The ashes borne on the foreheads of the faithful this day are a sign not only of our own immortality but a sign that humanity has failed. Time and again we have chosen war over peace, greed over abundant generosity, and 'sin, death, and the devil' run rampant in our world.

Today we hear this invitation from the prophet Joel, to return to the Lord. It is an invitation to lay aside sin and selfish ambition, both individual and corporate. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The kind of love that has the power to make all things new. It is an invitation into a deep, baptismal reflection of how Christ, whose body and blood crucified and risen, have been broken for you. For the world. Wear your cross today both the reminder of our reality and the invitation to live anew in the waters of baptism, where you have already died and been raised with Christ.

Devotion above and prayer on the last page by Pastor Erika Uthe, Assistant to the Bishop of the Southeastern Iowa Synod (ELCA)

To sign up for a daily Lent devotion from the Office of the Bishop visit:
<https://seiasynod.org/lent/>

For a week now the world has been watching anxiously. Praying tirelessly. Hoping for a peaceful resolution that would stop any more bloodshed and lives lost. In the last few days, I have watched too many clips of young children, clutched in their mother's arms, tears streaming down their faces, sobbing uncontrollably, holding on tightly to the one stuffed animal they could grab in their haste to leave. Without saying a word, the fear they are experiencing is made abundantly clear and almost leaps through the screen so that you can feel it.

I find myself pondering the questions that must be going through their young minds. Will I return to my home? Will I return to my room and all my other stuffed animals and toys? Will I return to see my father who stayed behind? Surely, those mothers are asking similar questions. We all pray there will be a "yes" but who knows what they might return to. Will their home be there, or will it be in heap of rubble?

Joel's audience was experiencing their own perilous time of want and need. Joel uses the imagery of a "day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness," to describe the enemy at the doorstep, a plague of locusts. Should their onslaught continue, it would inevitably bring with it utter catastrophe. The "day of the Lord" it was thought, was at hand.

Joel makes no reference the sin of the people was the root cause of their current predicament. The call to return to the Lord their God was not an act of contrition but rather, an invitation amidst the current calamity to rest in the loving embrace of God, who *"is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."* Or, as Terence Fretheim writes, "the people are called to focus on God with all their heart and soul and plead for God to act on their behalf. They are called to "turn" to God in prayer to save them from the destructive effects of the plague and to restore the situation to normal."ⁱ

The word of God made known through the prophet Joel continues to call out to a hurting world on this night. In circumstances often beyond our control and in the face of destructive effects that plague the world, the prophet cries out, "Return to the Lord your God." When you have nowhere else to turn. Return to the Lord your God. When there is no end in sight. Return to the Lord your God. When fear abounds and overwhelms. Return to the Lord your God. Where doubt consumes and grief paralyzes. Return to the Lord your God. When catastrophe threatens to rule the day. Return to the Lord your God. Unto him can we always return. For he *"is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."*

Amidst the solemnity of this day in which the brokenness of the world manifests itself upon the screens placed in our homes or that we hold in our hands, the front pages of newspapers and the radios we listen to on our commute home from work, that brokenness also manifest itself in a cloud of darkened ash smeared upon our foreheads, a remembrance of our finiteness.

Lent is an invitation to confess the ways we have missed the mark living into what God told us mortals is good, "To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) Lent is an invitation to admit the times we have taken the grace of God in vain. Yet, Lent is an invitation into opportunity set before us from a gracious and merciful God slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love to. The opportunity to yet again be overcome with and experience a *kind of love that has the power to make all things new.*" An opportunity to wade

into “a deep, baptismal reflection of how Christ, whose body and blood crucified and risen, have been broken for you. For the world.” An opportunity to “Wear your cross today both the reminder of our reality and the invitation to live anew in the waters of baptism, where you have already died and been raised with Christ.” An opportunity to draw nearer to God who “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

Let us pray.

God of steadfast love, help us die to sin each day and be raised to new life in Christ. Turn our hearts toward you that forsaking all else we may be re-formed into the creation you intend us to be, working for love, justice, and peace in all the earth. Amen.

ⁱ Terence E. Fretheim; *Commentary on Joel 2:1-2, 12-17*; www.workingpreacher.org