

March 5, 2025  
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Ash Wednesday  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“The Time is Now”**

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

After being away from any classroom for almost thirty years, I decided to enroll in a seminary program at an Episcopal school in Virginia. While I was able to get back into the rhythm of lecture notes, essays, and papers, I soon realized that the world had changed in the intervening years. When I was in seminary, I typed all my papers on a portable electric typewriter; when I returned to school, all my writing was on my laptop using Microsoft Word. I submitted all my papers and other assignments on paper in person to my professor; since a lot of our work was done virtually, everything was submitted on this school’s online portal, using a code that was assigned to each student. While this was before Zoom became widely used, it took me some time to adjust to the uses of technology in the classroom and all that this means for students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

One aspect of the online portal for submission of class assignments was the strictness of its deadlines. All assignments had to be submitted by a certain date and time; after this deadline, the portal was closed and there was no way anything could be submitted to the professor. This was radically different from my experience in both university and seminary; while there were deadlines that were expected to be met, it was not uncommon for students to ask for an extension due to personal circumstances. The granting of such extensions was solely at the professor’s discretion; while most were understanding and lenient in the granting of such extra days to complete an assignment, one seminary professor refused to grant any extensions. Dr. Lull would mention this on the first day of class, his rationale being that since we were training to become parish pastors, we would be expected to meet a deadline with our sermons every Sunday morning; there was no way a pastor could ask their congregation for an extension on Sunday morning at 10:00 am. We needed to become prepared to meet these weekly deadlines, Dr. Lull explained, and the best time to start was as seminarians.

There are some deadlines that are stricter than others. The monthly date of our mortgage payments is often one that cannot be extended; missing even a single mortgage payment can have serious repercussions. Income taxes are due on the

deadline date of April 30, although one can file a request for an extension with Canada Revenue that is often granted. When we go to the grocery store, we often encounter “best by” dates on perishable products like milk and cheese; while these deadlines are required by law, the products are often edible for several days after the posted deadline. We find some grace and flexibility in certain situations, but it is best to heed a deadline lest we find ourselves in serious trouble.

On this Ash Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent in which we are called to return to the Lord in repentance in the assurance that our Lord is “*gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*” (Joel 2:13). Lent is a forty-day period of preparation for our observance of Holy Week, the central week of the Christian year in which we follow Jesus from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to his Last Supper with his disciples on Maundy Thursday and his gift of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We are then invited to follow our Lord to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he is betrayed by Judas Iscariot and arrest by the Roman soldiers who bring him before Pontius Pilate, where he is condemned to death. On Good Friday, our attention is centered on Golgotha and the Crucifixion of Our Lord, the dark moment when it appears that the forces that opposed Jesus throughout his life have won. But we then gather on the glorious morning of Easter Sunday to hear the good news proclaimed by the angelic beings to the women at the tomb: “*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen.*” (Luke 24:5). During a season modeled after the forty days of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, in this Lenten season we are invited to renew our relationship with God and be born anew through the forgiveness of sins to walk with our Lord as children of the light.

Our first lesson on this first night of Lent comes to us from the prophet Joel, one of the Twelve Prophets that we have studied in our Thursday Bible Study class. While on first reading it may appear that the book of Joel is a work that glorifies Israel at the expense of other nations, Joel “*presents a message that is integral to the Christian gospel at any time.*” (Elizabeth Achtemeier). The prophet warns his audience of the coming of the “Day of the Lord,” a day of judgment for those who have failed to live according to God’s teachings in the Torah. As our lesson begins, we hear the call for the people to “*blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain!*” (Joel 2:1). The trumpet here is a *shofar*, a curved ram’s horn that was sounded to warn the people of an approaching enemy (“*Blow the trumpet in Tekoa, and raise a signal on Beth-haccharem; for evil looms out of the north, and great destruction.*” – Jeremiah 6:1). The enemy that is approaching is God’s mighty army that has come to destroy God’s enemies, before which no one can escape (“*Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the*

*LORD's wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.*" – Zephaniah 1:18). Those who have placed themselves in opposition to the Lord will find that *"their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come."* (Joel 2:2).

Yet as dire as this situation appears, there is a message of grace from the prophet: the deadline has not yet arrived, and there is still time to change one's circumstances so that the Day of the Lord will not be for them the day of their destruction. This message of hope appears when the prophet proclaims the word of the Lord that *"even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing."* (2:12). God calls upon the people to return to worship with all their hearts and to "rend their hearts," a reference to the rending of garments in lamentation that was an expression of deep emotion in times of grief, terror, or horror at one's misfortune (*"Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, 'Tear your clothes, and put on sackcloth, and mourn over Abner.'"* – 2 Samuel 3:31). The expression of repentance from the people's heart is to be even more emphatic; "heart" in Hebrew is an idiom that is like what the brain symbolizes in modern usage, the seat of the will and intellect. The people of God are being called to turn away from apostasy and return to God in a deliberate act of will (*"Cast away from you all transgressions, otherwise iniquity will be your ruin."* – Ezekiel 18:31).

The call to "repent" or to turn to God has the meaning of "turning around," of going in the opposite direction, so that a person is leading a life different from what one has lived before (*"O LORD, do your eyes not look for truth? You have stuck them, but they felt no anguish; you have consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to turn back."* – Jeremiah 5:3). But the change that the people are being asked to make is based on the nature of God, who will accept the people into the covenant relationship God first established with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3); the possibility of renewal and restoration is based on the reference to the Lord as "your God." The nature of God is set forth in an ancient creedal statement that is found eight other times in the Old Testament, in which God is confessed as being *"gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love"* (2:13).

- "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the

children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation." – Exodus 34:6-7.

- "But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." – Psalm 86:15.
- "The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." – Psalm 145:8.

"Gracious" is the total goodwill of a superior to an inferior, while "merciful" may be defined as the love of a mother for her child. "Slow to anger" means that God does not immediately punish people for their sins but waits patiently for repentance and return. "Steadfast love" (*hesed*) is God's faithful, everlasting, loving observance of the covenant bond with the people. It is based on these qualities of God that the people will be allowed to return, even though they had earlier deserted their God. If the people return, God will once again turn to them and restore their grain and wine and oil for use in their worship. But repentance does not coerce God; the Lord is free, and God will be gracious to whomever God chooses to be gracious: "*Who 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?*" (2:14). The decision about renewal is up to God, not human beings ("*I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy*" (Exodus 33:19). If God restores the produce necessary for the resumption of daily temple offerings, that will be a sign that God has accepted the people into communion once again; "*Perhaps the LORD will be merciful and spare us! That is the hope but there is no presumptive guarantee.*" (Dennis Olson).

The prophet now turns to the priests and orders them to take the leadership in calling the solemn assembly of repentance. The same trumpet that had warned of the coming of the Day of the Lord, the day of judgment, now calls the people to a religious gathering ("*Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon on the festal day.*" – Psalm 81:3). The call to "sanctify a fast" has the meaning of setting apart for God's purposes by making complete preparations for worship. No one has to be exempted, because no one is exempt from the judgment of God on the Day of the Lord: "*Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast.*" (2:16). The prayer that Joel furnishes the priests is typical of communal laments, an indication that Joel's writings are firmly embedded in the worship traditions of the people of Israel:

- “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?’” – 2:17.
- “You have made us the taunt of our neighbours, the derision and scorn of those around us. You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughing stock among the peoples.” – Psalm 44:13-14.
- “Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, ‘Where is the LORD your God?’ My eyes will see her downfall; now she will be trodden down like the mire of the streets.” – Micah 7:10.

The plea has three parts. First, the priests are to appeal to God’s pity, the God who has compassion like a father to his children (*“As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.”* – Psalm 103:13). Second, the priests are to appeal to God’s covenant relation with the people. God has been their God through many centuries, despite their sin. The priests must ask that God’s steadfast covenant love continue (*“For they are the people of your very own possession, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm.”* – Deuteronomy 9:29). Third, the priests are to remind God that the Lord’s own honour is at stake. If the people should perish, their enemies will say that God has been unable to save the people (*“As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’”* – Psalm 42:10). It is *“on the basis of that promise of God’s future action [that] the whole book centers on the need for repentance and return to God.”* (Achteimeier).

- “The text of Joel provides the blueprint for the Ash Wednesday service – a liturgy of fasting and a broken spirit, a confession of sin, a seeking of God’s forgiveness, urgent prayers of intercession, and a return to the long line of God’s people who have read and enacted the liturgical movement embedded within the present book of Joel. Tracing its steps is like walking a Lenten labyrinth, cleansing the soul and returning us to remember who we really are and who our God truly is. Let the journey begin!” – Olson.

Ash Wednesday is a somber occasion in which we wear the ashes of repentance as we are reminded that *“you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”* We confess that we have failed to live according to God’s teachings for God’s holy people, that we have *“not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven.”* (ELW Ash Wednesday Service). But even on this solemn night of confession and repentance, there is the promise of forgiveness and restoration, because we come into the presence of a God who we know is not a harsh, judgmental

God who seeks our destruction, but a God who we know is gracious and merciful, a God whose love for us and for the world is so great that he gave his only Son, so that “*everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” (John 3:16). We heed the Lenten call to return to the Lord in the assurance that it is not too late to repent, that the deadline has not passed, that now is indeed “*the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!*” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

- “So the church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word *lenten*, meaning ‘spring’ – not only a reference to the season before Easter, but also an invitation to a springtime for the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

The Word of God that calls us to return to the God of grace, mercy, and steadfast love is not a warning for us that the deadline is approaching and that there will be no second chances or a grace period once this portal is closed; it is an invitation for us to return to the God who is the source of light and life, the one who promises us joy that can conquer despair and light that no darkness can overcome. It is a call for us to recognize that the time is now to come back into God’s loving presence so that every day we might be renewed and strengthened to live in the comfort of God’s holy and certain hope and the joy that provides strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. We need not wait another day or fear that the deadline is approaching; now is the time for us to return to the Lord, the God of steadfast love!

Amen.