

SECOND READING: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

pg 846 OT

1 Blow 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— 2 a 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.

12 Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 13 rend 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. 14 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? 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; 16 gather 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. 17 Between 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?" "

## **“Rending our Hearts”**

*The terrible war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended in December 1995. The fighting between Serbs and Croats had set itself along ethnic and religious lines and so deepened the divisions between the warring factions that it seemed impossible to imagine any type of peace, much less healing and reconciliation. A Franciscan priest began a revolutionary project in early 1996. He recruited singers from across the country, people who were gifted in music. They were not necessarily professionals, but just people who were known in their towns and communities for their voices. He brought them all together, Muslims and Christians, Serbs, and Croats, some literally fresh off the battle field, and asked them to begin to sing together. But not just any songs. He asked them to sing the most traditional and well-known and deeply rooted religious songs of the Bosnian people, both Christian songs and Muslim songs. He asked them to sing the songs of their enemies. He asked them to sing the songs of their enemies. Some immediately understood the healing potential of the project and plunged into singing all the music, both their own songs and the songs of their enemies. Others' pain was so deep that they could not imagine singing the music that had been the battle cry of people who had shot and shelled and killed their comrades, their loved ones, their families. But even those who could not sing at first stayed in the room and listened, some of them sitting silently with tears of anger on their faces through months of rehearsals before they could voice a single note. But eventually they all sang, and the choir is still together today.<sup>1</sup>*

Tonight, on Ash Wednesday, we come to this service to together recognize we too have an enemy...one that is within us...that is, sin and death. We do not honor it by singing its song. Be clear on that. It does that on its own, for WE ARE SINFUL, MORTAL CREATURES. But we DO confront our enemy. We confront our sinfulness and mortality, by admitting it and saying that it is real. We stare it in the face and allow the abyss to approach. We quit fighting our desire to deny its reality, to think that if we don't look under the bed it won't get us.

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<sup>1</sup>Whitney Rice. “Singing the Song of our Enemy” <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/singing-song-our-enemy-ash-wednesday-march-6-2019>. (accessed 3-5-19).

Tonight, we do as did the ancients. Joel, the Jewish prophet in 8<sup>th</sup> c BCE, told his people, prior to the what they knew to be a coming day of judgement, that the Lord wanted them to, “*return to him with all their hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.*” He told them to, “*rend their hearts and not their clothing.*” In other words, he asked them to rip open the place where their sin lived and warned them to not get caught up empty piety. Tonight, we rend our hearts where sin lives. We admit our lack of faith, our hopelessness, our doubts and fears. We let out of the closet that which we are not wanting to admit lives there. We tell the truth about our habits that we just can’t kick, and we confess our guilt and shame, those things about ourselves we most regret. We confess what we know keeps us from living into the perfect humans which God created us to be, and the perfect humans which God has shown us how to be in Jesus Christ. Baptist preacher, Paul Duke, says, “*to contemplate the realities of human transgressions is to arrive at a place of horror and deep embarrassment because sin is a desecration of ourselves and of creation, itself. It is an affront to the One who has created, blessed, entrusted, called and moved among us with fearsome self-giving love.*”<sup>2</sup> That’s what we openly confront tonight. Yes, tonight we let ourselves be marked by our enemy’s truth. We put the sign of ash, of brokenness and destruction, of finality on our foreheads. And we hear, “*We are dust and to dust we shall return.*” (Gen 3:19)

But the mark that we make tonight is more than just a smudge of ashes. It is in the shape of a cross. This is because we remind ourselves of something more. We remind ourselves that there on the cross, God, who aches over the barrier we’ve placed between ourselves and He, came to be one of us, and he humbled himself in the person of Jesus Christ to the point of death to remove the barrier. There on that agonizing place of torture and death, on the cross, God in Christ, gave himself as a sacrifice on our behalf. He did it in solidarity with all of us, all the sinners and the sinned against. And on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, on Easter morning, he showed us and all the world that he DID NOT COME TO CONDEMN THE WORLD BUT TO SAVE IT for he rose from the grave, breaking the bonds of death for all who share his flesh forever. This allows us

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<sup>2</sup> KC Ptomey quoting Rev Paul Duke, Co-Pastor, FBC-Ann Arbor, MI; Ash Wednesday service, 2/22/12 PTS.

to sing praises even on our way to the grave. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, *“But He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds (stripes) we are healed”* ([Isaiah 53:5](#); [1 Peter 2:24](#)).

Yes, the shape of the mark on our foreheads reminds us of this. And, and the word, dust, in the phrase, *“We are dust and to dust we shall return”* reminds us of something too. It is from Gen 3 and it resonates with the same word in chapter 2 ... *“Then the Lord God formed them from DUST from the ground and breathed into them the breath of life!”* It resonates because... in compassionate, amazing, and startling love, God also breathed life into dust. God is a lover of dust! God continues to breathe life back into us, sinners, through Jesus. Through Jesus' sinless life of example, through his self-less sacrifice and then death on the cross, and through the staggering power of the resurrection, God has blown into our very beings, into our very lungs, a new way forward, a new, transformed way to live, a free, beautiful, new life. We are forgiven in Jesus Christ and restored to the persons we were intended to be. As God, in the beginning, breathed life into the DUST of the earth, so God in Jesus breathes new life into us. As my professor KC Ptomey used to say, *“God does amazing things with dust”!*<sup>3</sup>

*(Long pause)* Soooooo.....I've wondered, what made it possible for the Serb- Croat choir to sing the songs of their enemies? Could it not be that it helped them to face the full reality of the pain and death that they had walked through? They did not come to praise their enemies as lovely and right, NO! But what they came to do was admit that they could not deny the grief, anger and hatred in their hearts any longer. They rent their hearts realizing that if they did not, if the pain was left there, their enemy would surely win, consuming them and killing them spiritually even if they had not physically.

We too, need confront the enemy within, sin, the wages of which is death. We can do so by rendering our hearts in the light of the resurrection. Then, we defy its power over us. No, we, Christians, do not deny evil, but by the grace of God, we can shake our fist at it and

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<sup>3</sup> KC Ptomey. Sermon: Ash Wednesday. 2/22/12. APTS

point to Easter morning and defy its victory over us. *“O death where is thy sting. O death where is thy victory?, right? (1 Cor 15:55)*

Brothers and sisters, lets humbly walk these next 40 days together with our eyes fixed on the “wonder” of the cross and the “joy” of Easter morning. Tonight, let us rend our hearts before the lover of dust, who will hear or prayers of confession, accept our acts of penitence, forgive us yet again and compel us through the power of love to forgive others as we have been forgiven, who will help us *“return to him with all our hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning for our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”* May the forgiveness be freeing. May the love be warm and abiding. May our journeys be blessed, friends. Amen.