

Lent: a Springtime for Your Soul

Joel 2:1,2,12-17

Another season of Lent... "So what?" some may ask. "So what?" Even some people who call themselves Christians may ask. What is this Lenten season all about? Why do we begin with this Ash Wednesday service? And what are these ashes all about?

The word "Lent" comes from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning springtime. It was a time anticipating Spring growth. Lent is a springtime — a spring-cleaning time, if you will — for our souls... for our innermost beings... for our whole persons. A time for deep reflection and cleansing. In many ways, Lent presents us with a spiritual new year beginning. A season to contemplate our lives in the journey to the cross that we are invited to make with Christ during this season.

So how, as autumn beckons very soon, how is this soul springtime to occur? Well, let's turn to the prophet Joel, and to the people of Israel to whom he speaks, to learn more. And may I flag that we're not about to undertake a "three easy steps to a spiritual springtime for your soul"; but an earnest journey, calling us to dwell in the Word of God.

As we come to Joel chapter 2, the Israelites described here yearned for a springtime. They and their country were being crushed, devastated... Joel describes the siege they were under from drought, locusts, and other nations who taunted them, "Where is your God?" Maybe we can somehow sometimes relate to such seasons in our lives, too. We can face pressure, opposition, sometimes vitriol because of our faith, our deeply-held conscientious views.

In our lives, too, the Spirit of God working through the Word of God will bring us face to face with the law of God. We come very uncomfortably face to face, in the mirror of the Word, with our sin. Have you ever related very keenly and uncomfortably with your sin (like David in Psalm 51 after the prophet called him out for his terrible evil sins)? I have.

Lenten reflection can be very uncomfortable. Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.

As we listen to the first verses of Joel 2, this siege of devastation is only an introduction to **the day!** The day of the Lord is coming, is near.

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy hill.
Let all who live in the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming.
It is close at hand —
a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and blackness.
Like dawn spreading across the mountains
 a large and mighty army comes,
such as never was in ancient times
 nor ever will be in ages to come.

Joel 2:1-2

The day of the Lord... terrible, dark, bringing people to tremble. For you see, this people of Israel would only be getting their just desserts. This people has turned from God. "Where is your God?" In my self, in my greediness, in my power. All of these may have been the answers given. The day of the Lord is coming. **Where is your God? So St Paul's, where is your God?**

Are we really oh so different from the people of Israel? The day of the Lord is coming. Don't we too turn from God when it suits us? Surely I was sinful at birth, all my sins, even hidden and secret, are against the Lord. The day of the Lord is coming. Aren't we too in need of help — a true springtime of the soul — before that day? When is the Lord coming for you? Are you prepared?

And so God, through Joel, calls to Israel and to Neville Otto and to all of us:

Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
Rend your heart
and not your garments.
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.

Joel 2:12-13

Return to me with all your heart. Repent! Turn to me! And people are called to repentance, not because of the threat of immanent destruction, but because of the Lord's compassion... because he is true as the God of the covenant.

Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love...

Joel 2:13b

Our Lord makes the same call as he begins His public ministry on the way to the cross: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." Luther says in the first of his 95 theses, "The whole of the Christian life is to be a life of repentance." That's His call to us tonight at the beginning of the Lenten season.

So this season called Lent, this Ash Wednesday with its ashes, this springtime of the soul is not about three easy steps and one season of life... but about a life-long longing of God's heart to be in a life-giving relationship with you and me and all people.

And specifically in Lent, it is the Lord's merciful call to us to turn to him which motivates what we do. God having the power to destroy. God having the reason to destroy, but rather showing his abounding love, grace and mercy.

That's what the ashes are about. We hear the words of the funeral service: "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." We know of our frailty, our mortality, our inability to stop death. But these ashes are in the sign of the cross, reminding us also that God has turned to us in all His power, by giving His Son to be truly human like us, to ashes and dust too; that in death, He brings life. That's what our ashes are about this evening — our turning, throughout these forty days, in repentance to the one who saves, even though we don't deserve it. Focus



on the amazing thing God does for you this Lent. Maybe you hear the Lord's call in Joel, and Jesus' call in Matthew, that fasting is a sign of this repentance. It's a Lenten tradition to give something up in Lent. But it's a tradition that I sometimes wonder whether people understand anymore. The point of fasting is to simply assist us to meditate on the Lord's suffering and death for us in his Word to us. Maybe Fridays as the day of the Lord's crucifixion or Wednesdays which connect you to Ash Wednesday may help you in a time of fasting. Maybe some of us go without something for the whole of the Lenten season. My friends, please do consider these things, but always and only if they help you in reflecting on your relationship with our Lord, and his relationship formed with you in love in His Word.

As Joel says, "Rend your heart, not your garments."

So, St Paul's, "Where is your God?" Our God is here at the font, and here at the Table of Grace, and here in the Word of God, and here at the cross, and here among God's people.

Repent! Turn to God in Jesus Christ. Follow him this Lent and all the days of your life. For the day of the Lord is near. Journey with him to the cross and receive the gift of new and eternal life. Amen.

Video of the service including the above address: <https://youtu.be/bQdsrPkYglM>