

Ash Wednesday

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on February 18, 2026

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

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless God's holy Name.*

There are lots of trumpets in today's readings. In Joel, the first blow is the shofar, to sound the alarm that an army is invading, an army of locusts. The second blow of the shofar is to call people to the fast. Drought and locusts – of biblical proportions – are on the way. Joel's context was bad – the devastation by the locusts was catastrophic and unprecedented, compounded by the drought.

Tell your children and your children's children.

The devastation is going to be so severe that it must never be forgotten. '*The utter destruction of our nation,*' says Joel, '*will be remembered for ever.*'

Joel calls the Nation to prayer as the way to try and make sense of what is happening, to figure out how to endure and to remain faithful to God despite having nothing to offer to God because the locusts and the drought eliminated their offerings of blessing: grain, new wine and oil. There was nothing for the Nation to do in this horrific situation that was literally darkness due to the sheer masses of locusts.

Joel – and Jesus – call us inward: *they call us to lament*. In the fear, in the bewilderment, in the helplessness, Joel calls the Nation to *lament*, and not just a few; but *everyone*: the aged, the children, infants at the breast, the bridegroom, and the bride.

Our common definition of *lament* is to express regret or to mourn. But biblically and spiritually, to *lament* is not just a bunch of us complaining about the darkness and fear. Lament is to gather the pain and fear of your own and others, to make meaning of the root of that pain and fear, and to reorient your perspective on the root of that pain and fear so you can lift it up in prayer and praise for God to act. *Lament* requires us to look inward at ourselves, to search around our insides and find what is really at the heart of our problems and at the heart of our relationship with God, and then to genuinely appeal to God to act in love for God's Children, not for just oneself. As I said on Sunday:

*You can't control what other people do;
but you can control how you respond.*

To *lament* is the process of controlling how you respond.

As we *lament*, we share our fear and grief with God, but not just share it, but *offer* it. As an *offering*, our *lament* is *praise* to God and our confidence in God's power and love that God knows our pain and fear. In our *offering*, God knows that we are still in relationship. In offering our pain and fear, we are asking God to act, and that action might be through us, but we won't know until we make the offering.

Biblically and spirituality, *lament* is never only for ourselves, but for all who are enduring the same pain and fear. *Lament* is much deeper than remorse. *Lament* requires us to look inward and to be in solidarity with all who suffer. And through our *lament*, we begin to see and hear God. And as we start to see and hear those glimpses of God, we will see the pathway to restoration. So, *lament* is *not* remorse. *Lament* is an offering of our pain and grief to God, nurturing that close relationship we have with God. *And lament* is also about striving for hope.

After the Last Supper was Jesus' moment of *lament*. It was His moment of pain and fear:

Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.

He had to make meaning of His pain and fear of his Crucifixion and Death. He had to reorient His perspective and lift it up in prayer and praise for God as He says:

*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me;
yet, not my will but yours be done.*

And He did so not on just His behalf, but on *our* behalf. And everything that flowed from Jesus' moment of *lament* is wherein lies our own hope.

And because of that hope, we *lament* during Lent. Our *lament* causes us to *turn* back toward God. And that *turn* is what we know as *repentance*. That's the familiar theme of Lent: *repentance*. Today we are called to a period of self-examination; of almsgiving, prayer and fasting; of repentance.

In a moment we will recite Psalm 51 together. It is an act of repentance, asking for God's grace. As we take in the words of the Psalm, we will feel the desperation of the author. But we will also feel the genuine desire to change our way of life, to *turn* back to a life lived for God's purposes. Our *lament* takes us inward to find the root of our pain and fear, to reorient how we confront it, and as we *repent*, as we *turn back to God*, we lift that up to God in prayer and praise.

To *lament* prevents us from practicing our "*piety before others in order to be seen by them*" because *lament* requires us to look inside ourselves and offer up those vulnerabilities. It's harder to fake.

The trumpet is calling the Nation to worship, the trumpet is calling us to *lament*.

This is the time to take a deep look inside, search around our insides and find what is really at the heart of our relationship with God, to find the nucleus of the grief and fear, and *turn* to God and make it an offering.

May God hear our *lament* and restore us.