

Ash Wednesday 2025

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on March 5, 2025

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

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

Every Ash Wednesday, we are confronted with these two opposing instructions with what to do with the trumpet:

*Joel says: Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Jesus says: Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you.*

One could not be more opposed to the other. But context is everything! And both Joel and Jesus are rightfully speaking to their listeners. Joel's first blow of the trumpet, the blow of the shofar, is to sound the alarm that an army is invading, an army in the form of locusts. Joel has another blow of the shofar to call people to the fast, later in today's reading.

Let's dive into Joel's context because we only hear Joel twice on a Sunday morning. The only other time is at the end of October in Lectionary Year C, which is actually this year, and it's the continuation of today's text.

I want to explore Joel because I believe that we are in a similar situation as the Nation of Israel was when Joel was prophesying. It is important that our faith informs the rest of our lives, and what Joel had to say to the Nation of Israel 2,500 years ago may point us in a spiritually constructive direction as we try to make sense of what is happening in our own nation today, what we may have to endure and what the other end may look like, however far away that is.

Joel's context was drought and locusts – literally of biblical proportions. When he says “*like blackness spread upon the mountains*” he truly means that the swarm

of locusts completely obscured the mountains and the sun. There was a locust plague in Palestine in 1915, and there are photographs. What Joel described is somewhere between 500 and 300BC matches the photographs from 1915.

Joel's context is bad – the devastation by the locusts was catastrophic and unprecedented, compounded by the drought. It's so bad that Joel says

*Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children,  
and their children another generation.*

As early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse of chapter 1! And while 'tell you children and your children's children' is common in the OT, it's used overwhelmingly to tell them of God's greatness. In Joel, it's to tell them of the devastation. That's how significant the devastation is – it must never be forgotten.

But what can the people do? Their custom was to make offerings to God in the Temple – that was how their relationship with God was nurtured. But the destruction caused by the locusts and the drought eliminated their offerings of blessing: grain, new wine and oil. There was nothing for the Israelites to do in this horrific situation that was literally darkness due to the sheer masses of locusts.

Today, some feel the darkness around us and the hopelessness. Many are living in real fear; others are so bewildered and shocked in disbelief; and many feel helpless. Even being a Christian is hard. False prophecies are being taken as Gospel Truth of what God wants for us today; scripture is being warped into unrecognizable theo-babble to justify cruelty and the seizing of power. We have locusts of a different kind: oligarchs eating up everything they can to justify tax cuts for themselves. White Supremacist Christian Nationalism is swiftly infiltrating the most powerful and influential corners of society. We are in Joel's time, and the shofar is blowing – it's blowing very loudly and constantly – and we get it, but we are helpless. And what do we hear at this sacred moment of Ash Wednesday? Joel and Jesus call us inward: *they call us to lament.*

I don't want to lament; I want to fight! I want to make everything right, NOW! I want good to overcome evil! I want light to overtake darkness! I want God to act! But that is just fueling my fear, my bewilderment, my helplessness. Joel calls us to lament, and not just me, not just you; but *everyone*: the aged, the children, infants at the breast, the bridegroom, and the bride.

But what is *lament*? Is it just a bunch of us complaining about the darkness and fear around us? No! Bishop, scholar and professor NT Wright says that lament is several things: praise, proof of our relationship with God, a pathway to intimacy with God, prayer for God to act, and participation in the pain of others<sup>1</sup>. Lament requires us to look inward at ourselves, to search around our insides and find what is really 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 me.

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. Our lament is proof that we have a relationship with God, or else we wouldn't offer our grief and pain. Our lament shows that we have anxiety about the strength of our relationship with God, and we're willing to work on being more intimate with God. In offering our fear and grief, we are asking God to act, and that action might be through us, but we won't know until we make the offering.

But even more importantly when faced with society-wide fear and grief, our lament is not only for ourselves, but for all who are experiencing fear and grief. Lament is much deeper than complaining. 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* complaining. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ntwrightonline.org/five-things-to-know-about-lament/>

Today, some feel the darkness around us and the hopelessness. Many are living in real fear; others are so bewildered and shocked in disbelief; and many feel helpless. NT Wright wrote in an article for *Time* magazine at the beginning of lockdown in 2020:

*It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, ~~even in our self-isolation,~~ small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new ~~scientific~~ understanding, new hope.<sup>2</sup>*

The shofar is blown to warn of an incoming army. But the shofar is also blown to call people to worship, as it does in Joel's second reference:

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly; gather the people.*

This Lent, we are called to *lament*. Let us take a deep look inside, search around our insides and find what is really at the heart of our relationship with God, let us dig around to find the nucleus of the grief and fear, and make it an offering to God. And then let us genuinely appeal to God to act in love for God's Children and look toward hope.

For the Israel of Joel's time, Yahweh responded to Israel's heartfelt lament and all was restored, a sign that God had not abandoned them; God was still among them. This Lent, may our lament lead us to know that God is still among us, too.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>