

God's power overcomes our powerlessness
Sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, March 6, 2019
Ash Wednesday, Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 (NRSV): *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-- 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....*

[v. 12-17:] Yet 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. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. 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? Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; 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. 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?'"

We have come here today to share the liturgy of Ash Wednesday. This is no ordinary occasion that gathers together Christians and those curious about Christianity. We all are likely to be here because we know something about Ash Wednesday and its meaning.

There is something strangely reassuring in this observance of Ash Wednesday. We remind ourselves of the stark contrast between God's power and authority and our mortality and fallibility. Perhaps in this very contrast between God's power and our powerlessness, we find reassurance. We know that God is good, and in our powerlessness, we seek God's power for us and for our good. Ultimately, we know that God's power overcomes our powerlessness, and we find that knowledge reassuring.

The season of Lent that begins today sets aside time to examine the problem of sin in our lives. Something inside us knows that we need such a time—that we need Ash Wednesday, with its solemnity and perspective on human frailty. We are aware of our own limits and of how we have failed God, failed others and failed ourselves. Human imperfection strikes us as an obvious fact. One theologian once said that original sin is the one empirically verifiable truth of the Christian Faith—none of us is perfect and we all deal with the problem of sin.

We come to Ash Wednesday worship not because we need to learn about our own powerlessness, but because we seek the comfort of God's power. We want to kneel in confession, we want to feel the dry scrape of ashes on our forehead and the weight of a hand on our head. We want to hear that reminder of our mortality: "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We want to make some gesture that marks this season—some action that might sum up all the regrets that have built up over time, and lay them in God's strong hands. We seek a reminder that God's power overcomes our powerlessness.

During Lent, we practice self-examination and repentance. We are often aware of the faults of others, and most of us probably wish that the other person were more aware of his or her sins. In Lent, we turn that wish toward ourselves. The question for us in Lent is not 'how do *others* treat

others—what is *their* relationship with God,’ but the question for each of us is rather ‘how do *I* treat others—where is *my* relationship with God?’ Through the practice of self-examination, we can see how we have participated in breaking relationships and neglected our spiritual lives and neglected the wholeness to which God calls us.

We might discover how we have slipped into prejudice of others or set up subtle barriers to relationships. We might find feelings of bitterness or envy, long pent up anger and long-held grudges. If we dig a little deeper, we might find old scars still hurting from the sins of others. Here, where we find ourselves vulnerable before God and aware of our limitations, we are most in need of God’s power and comfort—of the mercy of Jesus Christ and the consolation of the Holy Spirit.

Self-examination is not an end in itself, nor is self-examination a practice in feeling guilty. Self-examination at its best places ourselves in God’s hands that we might know the truth about ourselves and the truth about God. True, we have failed ourselves, failed God, failed others. But also true is God’s love for us, his forgiveness of us through his son Jesus Christ, and true also is that God the Holy Spirit can empower us to new life. We see the truth in our limitations and our powerlessness, but we also see the truth in God’s sovereignty and God’s power.

Self-examination as a Lenten practice is also bound up with repentance. Repentance is not primarily about being sorry. Repentance is about turning toward God. Years ago, when I lived in rural Pennsylvania, I was returning from a trip to Washington and I took back roads to get home. These old roads twisted and turned, and didn’t follow a straight line. At one point, I should have turned right at a traffic light in order to stay on the northbound road. But I didn’t. I kept driving West. I started to notice—hey this is beautiful countryside! I don’t remember seeing this before! Then when I saw the signs, I realized that I had messed up. This is self-examination and confession.

But it would have been foolish for me to continue driving west to Lancaster. No, I needed to turn around and go back to where I messed up and get on the right road. That was the road that would get me back home, and I needed to turn around to get there. That’s repentance.

Repentance is about turning away from division and brokenness and toward reconciliation and wholeness. This is the call from the prophet Joel in today’s Old Testament reading. “Blow the Trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly, gather the people.” “Return to me [says the Lord] with all your heart.” Repentance is about turning toward God and taking the steps to reverse destructive processes we see at work. Where we have neglected our prayers, we can pray again. Where we have given up on someone, we can reach out again. Where we have refused to forgive, there we can forgive again. Where we have hurt, there we can bring life.

This is the calling of Lent. This is the aspiration that we have—that our life and the life of our community can be blessed with reconciliation and joy. Yet even in the practice of repentance, we know that we fall short. We are still powerless on our own to make everything right. But thank God—for we are not on our own. The liturgy of Ash Wednesday and the Lenten practices of self-examination and repentance are about accepting God’s grace in our lives, God’s love for us that is unearned and undeserved. The Good News is that God’s power overcomes our

powerlessness. God's grace overcomes our sin, God's love overcomes our fears that keep us from loving more deeply. The disciplines of Lent are ultimately about opening ourselves to a deeper experience of God's grace, and sharing that grace with others.

Jesus loved us while we were still sinners. Jesus reaches out to us with forgiveness and new life. Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to empower us for repentance and renewal. God's power overcomes our powerlessness.

“Return to the Lord, your God,” writes the prophet Joel, “for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Lent feels solemn because we are invited to be aware of our sins—our mortality and our powerlessness. But Lent also feels comforting because we are invited to be aware of God's mercy and grace—God's power to overcome our powerlessness and bring us with Jesus to resurrection and new life.