

“Who Knows, God May Leave a Blessing Behind?”

A sermon on Joel 2:1-2; 12-17

Ash Wednesday

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Without prompting we might never make it to this day. With prompting we might get past the unpleasantness. Obeying this prompt we may discover that our resistance has been misplaced. We might avoid the difficult truth of Ash Wednesday only to miss its blessing.

There are those things about life that you and I will do our best to avoid. In matters both serious and trivial that you and I find disagreeable, we have many strategies of avoidance.

Lyn Goodrum, with whom I work, is really good about stating to each of us what she needs and when she needs it. As we approach important dates in the church year she dutifully emails each of us with her list. On that list will be a variety of deadlines: the *Tower* for articles, bulletin announcements and details, letters to the congregation. When I see that message is from Lyn I know what's in it without even opening it up. And if I do open it up and actually see the list, it is absolutely amazing the ease with which I can successfully suppress all the information and requests on the list. Though I have seen it, the list evaporates in my mind.

Days will go by, sometimes even weeks will go by. It isn't that I don't know what I'm supposed to provide her, it is that I don't want to do it. I can find important reasons not to attend to the list: I have a sermon to research, a class to teach, a hospital to visit. I can edge that list right out of my brain.

Until the day of deadline does arrive. Then everything must be dropped immediately, and the unpleasant – at least for me – task finally tackled. Without Lyn's faithful prompting, I would never get anything – at least anything like her list for me – done at all.

You can think of plentiful examples from your own life, I am sure. Whether its doing your taxes, writing you will, paying the bills, fixing the dripping faucet – you have those parts of life that you will do about anything to avoid, ignore, resist or forget. We are each of us immature in our own very creative ways. These things you must be prompted about. Without the prompt you might never attend to them.

Ash Wednesday is a day like that. There is a woman I know who is a faithful church member, leader even. She is the sort of woman who would be at every event of a congregation. Many years ago a tragic event happened in her family. The event

happened on Ash Wednesday. From then on, as she would tell me, “I won’t be here on Wednesday. I don’t do Ash Wednesday anymore.”

I understood her avoidance. But I wish I could prompt her out of it.

On Ash Wednesday it is the trumpet that prompts us here. A trumpet is hard to ignore. In clear and sparkling tones, in a manner that cannot be avoided or ignored, the trumpet calls.

*Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
Sound the alarm on my holy mountain! . . .  
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.*

I am sure the aged and the children have other things they would rather be doing. It goes without saying that the bride and bridegroom would not want to be so disturbed. This will be a powerful prompting. Without it, no one would “do” Ash Wednesday. Without this prompt no one would come. Listen to the trumpet.

The immediate context of these verses was the catastrophic invasion of locusts. Joel was the prophet who connected the dots together and dared to name the reality that the whole nation was avoiding. “Blow the trumpet,” Joel demands. Sound the alarm. Confront what you are forever avoiding. The moment of truth is now here.

Ash Wednesday dares to tell the truth about our sin and about our brokenness. Ash Wednesday dares to breathe the truth about our mortality. In the comedian Steve Martin’s recent autobiography, he quips that “I’ve been depressed all day. I just figured out this death thing includes me.” Welcome to Ash Wednesday.

There is a grain of truth in that dark joke. Most seasons you and I can dodge our limits. We can cover, present, ignore, deny, and pretend that we shall continue unlimited in our powers, our goodness, our achievements. Ash Wednesday is the trumpet you hear, and the smudge of ash on your forehead is the annoying reminder for all to see that – for just this day if no other – you and I tell the truth about our limits, moral, physical, or spiritual.

Archbishop Tutu writes of the emotional experience of facing the truth. He tells of a meeting in which the formerly powerful agents of the state confronted the victims of their slaughter of innocents whose only fault was the color of their skin. The victims’ families

wept as they told their stories and they forgave their persecutors. The persecutors' tears flowed too. When deep truths are confronted tears can often be the result. But he draws out more than the unpleasantness of the task. These are not only the tears of dread and fear. They were the tears of a great suffering, the tears of some great reconciliation, the tears of a reunion they could not have dreamed about.

Joel's trumpet prompts the people to weep. These are not the tears of manipulation, hoping by sheer pathos to gain the Lord's forgiveness. What is needed now is not manipulation, but honesty and truth. For God is "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, God repents (changes) from punishing." These are the tears to greet God's forgiveness. These are tears that result from the action of some great mercy that shall wash over our sin and mortality and redeem it. These are tears that at the point of our common defeat bring an even greater mystery of grace.

Now that Christmas and Epiphany are over, there is the "unpleasant whiff at the thought of Lent and Good Friday" not far off now. It will mean "some great suffering," but as Joel leaves us, "Who knows whether God will not turn and relent?" and through this whole season of unpleasantness will leave behind a blessing beyond our dreams.

The prophet Joel tantalizes with his question, "who knows?" But you have much more than that. You have the promise of this meal, the communion of this bread and wine that bears the promise of God.

Avoiding the truth of this day does not avoid just the unpleasantness. It dodges the blessing it leads to. Ash Wednesday is the prompt you and I need. It is the trumpet call to a great and difficult facing up, a direct confrontation with all that you and I so vigorously avoid. And it brings us to a profound forgiveness and grace.

Blow the trumpet, call a solemn assembly. Face it. Who knows, maybe God will leave behind a blessing? Indeed God will. Indeed God will. Amen.