

Ash Wednesday **February 17, 2021**

*"Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning."*

Joel 2:12

Ash Wednesday plunges us into the season of Lent by immediately calling for repentance and asceticism, sackcloth and ashes. Indeed, these sacred and simple tokens remind us how far we are from God while simultaneously showing us a way home. The prophet Joel speaks to us, "Even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning" (Joel 2:12). The idea of repentance, of taking on more in these days where we are so weary, can feel particularly crushing and alienating.

However, consider the special relationship, the covenant, forged between God and an unassuming man who would become Abraham. It was truly unique for its day. Typically, a covenant between a lesser and greater power put the bulk of the restrictions and consequences on the lesser power. The greater power or ruler would offer protection in exchange for trade rights, a share of the harvest or outright payment. Should the lesser power fail to hold up their end of the bargain, they would suffer dire consequences – abandonment or death. However, if the greater power was unable to fulfill the agreement, there would be no consequences. It was a relationship of trust, but ultimately, a result of a power imbalance. God flips this concept of covenant on Abram.

God calls Abram to prepare for a standard covenant ceremony. Several animals are brought as offerings and split in half, their blood covering the ground. As the lesser party, Abram is expected to walk in between the split halves to seal the covenant. It was a particularly gruesome reminder of what would happen if he or his descendants failed to uphold their end of the bargain. Yet, once the offerings are laid out, God appears as fire, a light in the darkness. It is God, not Abram, who moves between the broken animals as the one responsible for the fulfillment of the covenant. This dramatic scene tells Abram and his future descendants that should they break the covenant, it is God's responsibility to fulfill the terms. God is on the hook for the fulfillment of the covenant's terms.

Harkening back to the foundations of the earliest relationship between God and the people to whom God chose to be revealed, Joel reminds us that it is God who will fulfill the terms of the covenant. We must only show up and be ready to work together. No

matter how dark it is, how far we have drifted or how much we have sinned; God will not destroy or abandon us. This is our solace in Lent. We must simply return to God.

Before making the covenant, God knows that we will fail, that we will break our end of the bargain time and time again. But in God's mercy and justice, God takes the place of the responsible party. As we begin this Lent, we cry out to God to remind God of the relationship forged with Abraham, Sara and their descendants. We beg God for mercy and ask to remember God's promises to us. We look for a way back to the faithfulness of God and journey with Jesus, whose love and sacrifice remind us that God is with us even in the darkness and that there is a light to release us from that darkness.

Brief Daily Reflections for the remainder of the week:

Thursday, February 18, 2021

Sackcloth and ashes – these two Lenten images are familiar. They have been burned into our minds as a part of our Lenten mythos. Yet, they can be missed as a part of a greater whole. Why are we called to repentance? By whom are we called?

Friday, February 19, 2021

God called Abram out of obscurity to forge a new path to salvation, a way out of the broken, dark world left behind by the Fall of Adam and Eve. How has God been calling you out of brokenness and darkness this season?

Saturday, February 20, 2021

As the Hebrews foresaw the coming of salvation, so too do we long to be released from darkness. Like them, we also endure the brokenness, hardship and pain that can come with darkness. Yet, even as we face it, especially because we are facing it, God is with us. How are you reaching out to God in your pain?