

More than Dust

Today, we begin our annual Lenten journey. This 40 day journey is where we are called to purposefully examine our lives and to turn back towards God. The readings for today can be used as a guideline of what we are to do. The Prophet Joel issues call similar to that of other prophets, "The Lord's coming & boy, is He MAD!! If you think you had a bad day so far, just wait till the Big Guy comes! You don't know what bad is, yet." Joel wants the people to avoid this judgment by repenting & turning back to God. This is the crux of Biblical prophecy. Even John the Baptist and Jesus used this 'formula' to announce the coming of the kingdom, the nearness of it.

This call back to God and following God's ways are good words to hear at the beginning of Lent. We are given a reminder that we are not doing things right, that we have strayed from the path of God. But this is not just an individual thing, something done on our own. Like the other prophets, Joel's prophecy has a community aspect to it. This is a reminder that our faith and that of our Jewish forefathers is not solely an individual thing, and individual faith, but that there is a wider component to our faith. We are connected not only to God but also to each other.

In the Gospel reading, we are cautioned by Jesus not to make a big deal of what we do, not to show others how 'holy' we are. Jesus cautions us that if what we do for prayer or fasting or showing how pious we are is so that others will see us and 'know' what a good Christian we are, then their acknowledgement will be our reward, a reward that is fleeting. Like the Biblical prophets, Jesus wants us have our hearts properly oriented toward God, so that we will do the right things for the right reasons.

So, as we stand on the threshold of our Lenten journey, we begin with reflection - assessing how we measure up as a Christian, doing those things we ought to do and not doing those things we should not be doing. We accept the call of the Biblical prophets and resolve to do those things that will ease the wrath of God, show God that we are following God's ways, God's teachings. Some would put it that we follow the law. But we must realize that simply following 'the rules' and doing those things to make-up for when we break the rules is not enough. Doing penance is not enough. We must repent, that is, turn our hearts back to God and follow God's ways, doing God's will. It is in following Jesus to the cross and beyond that we are able to be taken to where we are meant to be.

Many of us will mark this Lenten journey by giving something up, by 'sacrificing' one or more of our 'guilty pleasures.' Some people give up chocolate, or desserts; one person I know gives up drinking beer every year; some people will give up using social media or at least, reduce using it. Instead of giving something up, some people will take up something like reading the Bible daily, or praying more diligently, or some other 'practice' of the Christian faith.

But all of these things are what individuals do. Joel reminds us that there is a community element to repentance. What would our Lenten journey look like if we incorporated a community aspect? Besides having a midweek Lenten service and a community meal, what else would we do as a community, things that we would not be able to do individually? Do we, as a congregation, just look to keep the doors open or do we look for ways of spreading the Good News of Jesus to all kinds of people? Do we say that we welcome everyone, yet by our actions make those who are different from us feel unwelcome or not needed or wanted in the community? Do we act as gatekeepers to the body of Christ, determining who is worthy to step into God's

kingdom here on earth? These and many more are communal discussions that could be done not only at this time, but throughout the year.

We begin Lent with the reminder that we 'are dust & to dust we will return" a reminder that we are the created and that without the life-giving death of Jesus, that is all we will be - is dust. That is where the promise of the Gospel lies - that our lives are made more than a sum of the 'dust' particles that make us who we physically are by the One in whose image we were created and by the One who by His actions we are saved.

YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/Rr7VULvIEZc>