

Ash Wednesday 2024
Homily – Saint Joseph Parish
Father Craig Looney
Joel 2.12-17 St. Matthew 6.16-21



...“Come back to the Lord your God. He is kind and patient, always ready to forgive and not punish.”

The compelling words of the prophet Joel written about 500 years before the birth of Jesus...were written to a time God’s people were suffering from a plague of locusts and a terrible drought. Joel asks the people to repent sincerely of their sins...and to return to God “with fasting and weeping and mourning”.

Joel goes on to tell the people it is not enough to tear their clothes as a sign of repentance...they must have “broken hearts”. God sees the disposition of their hearts and will not ignore their prayers. He wants to forgive...not punish. He will keep his promise to help them...he will restore them and bless them and send his spirit among all the people...men, women, young and old.

Three hundred years before Joel, God commanded the prophet Jonah to go to the city of Ninevah to warn them their outrageous and evil behavior would only lead to their destruction. Jonah told the people to stop what they were doing, turn away from sinful actions, and return to God.

The people of Ninevah listened to Jonah and turned away from sinful actions. To show they were serious about turning back to God, everyone in Ninevah...even the king...put on burlap bags, covered themselves with ashes and fasted and prayed and repented. God saw their hearts were broken and spared the city.

Ash Wednesday commences our Lenten journey to the cross...the time to reorient our hearts, minds and souls away from those things that keep us from doing the things we

should have done and into doing the things we should not have done. Lent is the time for our hearts to be broken...that is a good thing...because it is only when our hearts are broken that we can let God in to make them unbroken.

The ashes placed on our foreheads are in the shape of the cross. While they remind us of our roots...we are made from dust and we will return to dust when we die...the ashes don’t symbolize extinction. The ashes symbolize restoration to New Life...of God’s love and forgiveness!

In the Gospel, Jesus tells us not to go around town looking sad or announcing to people we are fasting. It’s a good thing to have ashes placed on our foreheads. It’s a good thing to fast if we are able and to give up chocolate cake or the before-dinner cocktail. It’s also a good thing to something on for Lent...come to the Sunday Discussion Group...attend Wednesday Morning Prayer...take an hour out of our busy days to have quiet time with God. Learn what it means to have a broken heart...and to ask God to fix it.

The Ash Wednesday Collect is based on Psalm 51. The rubric printed in italics under the Collect instructs us to say the Collect every day during Lent until Palm Sunday.

We should approach Lent not as a Season of the Church we have go through to get to Easter...but as a gift from God to help us reorient our hearts toward him and in gratitude for the sacrifice Jesus made on the Cross.

We have the prophecies of Joel and Jonah and the people who listened to them who turned back to God, and the powerful words on Psalm 51 to help this be a good and productive Lent...

...“God...make our hearts pure and put a new and loyal spirit in us”.

