

Homily - St. Andrew's
Ash Wednesday – February 18, 2015
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Tonight the prophet Joel implores us: “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” This verse from Joel 2 is the core belief of the people of Israel. We will hear it again in a few minutes with a slight variation in Psalm 103. The translation on our green insert begins: “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness,” but the more familiar translation of verse 8 directly echoes Joel: “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” This is the most common way to hear this creedal statement, but twice in the Hebrew Scriptures we hear it with a very interesting additional phrase. In Joel, God also “relents from punishing.” Another translation of the Hebrew verb used here can be: “repent.” This means that one of the core characteristics of God affirmed by the prophet Joel alongside such fundamental characteristics as steadfast love, grace and mercy, is repentance.

It is fascinating that today, Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the holy season of Lent, the most serious season of repentance, when we are called to examination and amendment of life; we begin by affirming our belief in a God whose love for us is steadfast, who is infinitely patient with us, slow to anger, and who is grace and mercy itself... this God, we also affirm as one who repents. Today, and the season of Lent that begins today, IS about our repentance, and we will get to that tonight, but we begin with the repentance of God.

The repentance of God may not be a theme or a characteristic that we're particularly used to hearing or talking about, but it is a theme that runs all the way through the Bible. Its beginning is found very near The Beginning when following creation, people didn't behave as God wanted or expected. It got so bad that we are told in Genesis 6, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord repented that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” Here God's repentance and pained heart leads to a choice to destroy with a great flood. But following this terrible destruction, God sees what happened and as written in chapter 8: “the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.’”

This flood story is a harsh one, but if we set aside for a moment our focus on ourselves and what the story says about humanity, we can focus on instead is what we learn of God and God's pained heart... God's grief. More importantly, we can focus on what happens next... the first time God's grief led to destruction, but the next time, God commits within the Divine heart to renounce violence. This heartfelt commitment is followed up by a covenantal promise spoken to Noah that we'll hear on Sunday. What it shows is that God did indeed repent... first of creating humankind at all, then of using destruction as a way to solve a problem. The second time around God's heart chooses to self-limit the options available on the God-ward side of the relationship:

“I will never again destroy every living creature as I have done, even through the pain in my heart.”

If so early in our history, a mere 5 chapters after creation, our behaviour caused God's heart to be filled with pain, just imagine how it has been for God ever since. We think, “yeah, but God is well... God! Creator of the universe... God can simply wipe us out, turn the divine back on us, do whatever God wants.” But that's not actually true. Yes, God is all-powerful... so powerful, in fact, that despite the pain it causes God's own heart, God has chosen to self-limit the available options, such that turning away forever, or wiping us out in destruction is not a possibility – not if God is going to continue to be God.

From very early on, God has chosen instead a different way. God has chosen to repent, to relent from punishing, as we affirm in Joel 2:13. Even when God is most angry, most frustrated, most in pain, God repents, changes direction, alters or completely re-writes a planned course of action not because God has made a mistake, but so that God doesn't stop being God. Let me tell you a story that demonstrates just how God turns and changes the plan... Told in Exodus 32... the Israelite people are in the desert and Moses is delayed atop Mount Sinai and so the people make a golden calf to worship. God sees this and says, or perhaps yells at Moses: “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them...!” But Moses, out of love for the people or out of courage or just pure gall, Moses reminds God of salvation history thus far... of how God heard the people's cry and lead them out of Egypt, promising to take them to the promised land, of how God had made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Israel... “remember them,” Moses says... “And the Lord changed his mind [repented] about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.” (Ex 32:14)

The Hebrew verb we're translating as “repent,” has meanings that include “to repent, to regret, to feel sorrow, or to be sorry.” It is a verb that involves an attempt to influence a situation, linking a decision with emotion; effect with affect. This is certainly true in both the story of the flood and the story of the golden calf... in Genesis, God's grief is described and in Exodus, we can hear God's anger in his words: “let my wrath burn hot against them!” Both times, there is a choice, a decision, linked to the emotion.

In the written word, it can be hard to know what the emotion is behind the words on the page. Anybody who has ever lived a misunderstanding, on any side, of an email message, for instance, knows how easy it is to read words on a screen or a page with a different tone of voice than the writer's intent. In particular, anger and pain, are easily mixed up... Does Joel write?: [angry] “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.” OR Does Joel write: [pathos] “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.” Is God angry? Is God sad? God feels and expresses both, of that there is little doubt, based on the witness of scripture. I happen to think there is more pathos than anger here, but maybe it doesn't matter because what matters is what God chooses. Very early on, God decided that despite the emotion, whether it be anger, frustration with a “stiff-necked people,” or the grief of a pained heart, God has chosen to stick with us, come what may, through covenantal promise. And in our baptism, we too have made a promise to stick with God.

And so God implores us to return... to turn back to God from whatever idol we find ourselves worshipping, (even inadvertently); to turn back to God by working for justice in our world; to turn back to God by caring for the most vulnerable in our society; and to turn back to God by not letting our anger or our pain destroy the world around us. This lent, it is our turn, our time, to repent.

It's not that we shouldn't feel anger or pain... both are justified, reasonable, and healthy in certain circumstances. The question is: what do we do with those feelings? We can feel angry and do the right thing and we can feel angry and do the wrong thing. Our hearts can be pained and we can choose death... our hearts can be pained and we can choose life. There is no doubt that there is an uncontrollable wildness to strong emotions, but underneath our emotional life there is will and intellect and we are at our most healthy when we attend to all of it.

What is truly remarkable about what God says to us through the prophet Joel tonight is that in a few short verses, we are given some tools to help us with both our emotion and our will... the two modes are repentance and lamentation. First, lamentation: "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning..." Fast, weep, mourn... it is a call to feel our pain, and to express it in healthy ways. In a society overcome with depression, I wonder if the key to finding happiness is re-learning how to lament? When we mourn our losses, when we express our grief by, among other things, crying out to God, we are no longer held captive to these intense feelings.

The second mode is that of repentance. We are created in the image of God, and if God repents, if God changes the Divine mind about bringing disaster or punishing, surely we too can choose to stay in covenantal relationship. We too can turn from a plan based on anger and choose to love instead. We too can relent from punishing those who have hurt us and choose instead to forgive. We too can feel sorry when we make a bad choice and make a different one.

We are well on our way, for tonight we have already followed the instructions in the second part of today's passage from Joel: "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation..." We are here in solemn assembly, the people are gathered. And in a few minutes we will be ritually sanctified by ashes on our foreheads. It is a ritual we can engage in as both lamentation and repentance... we "Remember we are dust, and to dust we shall return." We lament our state, we courageously face our fate, and we repent, we turn, to choose life.

May our action tonight, in reflection and in ritual, set the tone for the rest of this lenten season. May we trust in God day-by-day, and return to God without fear, for our God is one who "is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and who relents from punishing."