

Ash Wednesday, C, 2007  
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
Feb. 21, 2007  
Title: Call a Solemn Assembly

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

This time of year there are lots of solemn assemblies. People slumped in chairs, heads bowed down, the rooms filled with deafening silence. These locker rooms breathe dejection, disappointment. The solemn assemblies of athletes whose efforts have come up short. They lost. They sit as a solemn assembly.

It's Ash Wednesday and we are here in the place of life as a solemn Assembly. The alarm has sounded, the trumpet has blown, the spiritual health check has been flunked, the vital signs are not vital. Nothing less  
Than fasting and prayer, nothing less than sackcloth and ashes

Beneath the words of Joel is the question: What do you do to awaken a complacent people?  
You sound the alarm. Call a spade, a spade. He strains against the powerful presumption to be private---come into the assembly! This is a crisis of Biblical proportions!

So here we are! Frankly, this may be the most uncomfortable day of the year. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return!"  
Rubs our face with our mortality. Put that on a child!!

The real issue is not our mortality, that we die.  
The real issue is the deaths we bring on ourselves because we have  
Failed to live as we were created.

Do you promise to live among God's faithful people, to hear his word and share in his supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through your words and deeds, to serve all people following the example of Jesus, to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

I hope those words are familiar to you. The covenant of our Baptism.

Binding us and our future to live reflecting the life of God in this world.

Were Joel at this solemn assembly he might hold these five promises up and demand a hearing. Naming the gaps between reality and intention, between what is and what is promised.

Would you be willing to put on ashes because someone of this Faith community feels left out? Would you be willing to come together in sorrow and lament because many fail to keep sabbath here? Would you be willing to rend your hearts because so many Opportunities to share the good news are timidly passed over? Would you fast and weep because there are more requests To serve others than we seem willing to meet?

Are these reasons to tremble? Like a stone dropped into the pond the ripple trembles from shore to shore.

Ash Wednesday is not about spiritual ‘one up man ship’. Where my failure is trumped by your failure. Where we look around the room and see who can hang their heads the lowest. Such unhealthy spiritual voyeurism turns this uncomfortable day on it’s head.

The gift of a Lenten journey and it’s beginning point—Ash Wednesday—is to restore us to life, to reorient, re-energize, re-assemble us as children of the living God. The story that calls us together and forms us is of a God who is in relentless pursuit of us, who wants us to grow, become the life giving people who bear the name of Jesus in this world.

He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding  
In steadfast love. Thankfully, abounding in steadfast love.  
Messengers of urgency, those Joels among us, seek to  
Draw us back to the rich, full life

Repentance is a disquieting proposition. It’s purpose is to make us uncomfortable with our sin, not with God. To turn our backs on death and turn toward the merciful one.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century revival movement in America used an anxious bench. It was an empty bench at the front of the solemn assembly. Evidently the community was told that this bench was for anyone anxious for the Lord. Come sit there! Come show your readiness! Let your desire be known.

Many lives were restored. People got out of the same old, same Old. They saw their lives in a new context! They dropped Their guard; the doors of their hearts opened;

Complacency was set aside. They turned around.

Fundamentally, Lent is a long anxious bench cushioned with the hope that in sitting, praying, fasting, almsgiving, we will be drawn into the restorative heart of our Lord Jesus. For He is the very fidelity of God waiting for us to return.

Blow the trumpet in Raleigh  
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.  
Between the vestibule and the altar, let the ministers weep.

My Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us be anxious for the Lord.  
Amen.