

Bugs and Ashes

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

I'm getting tired of winter, and looking forward to spring when the days get longer and warmer, the sun shines brighter and higher in the sky, the robin chirps in the morning, and crack of a driver on a golf ball fresh from a new sleeve sounds crisp and clear.

Ah, spring! But there's one thing I don't look forward to — the appearance of the first bug. Descending on us like an army, they're ready to eat the best of what we've planted, just when gardens are starting to show promise! Springtime bugs are voracious and relentless.

When the prophet Joel spoke to God's people, the memory of a plague of insects was still fresh; precious crops had been destroyed and hunger reigned. But God promised the people joy beyond disaster, and full gardens despite devastation. God's Word brings hope.

In our own struggles, despite heartbreaking setbacks, there is the promise of hope, as well, which begins on this day, Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday comes in the middle of nowhere. Our worship cycle is built around Sundays. The four Sundays of Advent, the Sundays in Lent, Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday — all on Sundays!

But Ash Wednesday sneaks up on you. People ask: Is that today? Oops, I forgot. Ash Wednesday is not convenient. Ash Wednesday is an interruption, not even falling on the same date every year.

And there's another good reason we try to forget. Ash Wednesday is an unwelcome reminder. A *memento mori*, the Latin phrase that means, "reminder of my death." You are dust and to dust you will return.

In our passage this evening Joel reports on the terrible things that have occurred in the land. There were plagues of locusts that devastated the crops, bad weather, bad luck, bad politics. And in the midst of all this, the people couldn't bring their offerings to the temple. If only, they cry, the Day of the Lord would come. Then everything would be all right.

Joel responds by telling the people that there's a better offering than the one they bring to the temple. Fasting, lamentation, mourning — repentance. Especially repentance.

Because as bad as it's been with the bugs and famine and hunger and turmoil, he says that there's something looming on the horizon that's even worse: the Day of the Lord! A day of judgment, darkness and not light.

That must have knocked the wind right out of the people. They had assumed that since they were God's people, the arrival of the Day of the Lord would be a good and glorious thing!

But Joel describes it as a day of judgment where we may be found wanting so much that the chosen people may even begin to wonder if they are, in fact, God's own.

The prophet Joel isn't just speaking to his time. He's talking to us, too. The Day of the Lord is more than automobiles crashing out of control or airliners falling out

of the sky, it's a call to ask ourselves if we are ready? It is a day of harrowing gloom. Who can stand in the face of such a day?

The Day of the Lord is not good news if you're not ready.

Joel's message written years ago in his day is for our day: Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord. Joel wrote in a time when people didn't have large wardrobes. Rending your clothes as a sign of repentance and grief wasn't just drama, it was true sacrifice. And Joel wants us to go even farther - to rend our hearts, to change our ways — to repent! While there's still time.

The title of my sermon is Bugs and Ashes, and I've spent a good bit of time dealing with bugs. What about the ashes?

Ashes are a symbol of the repentance Job expressed after calling out God and God calling back. When you study Job, you see that he repents from dust and ashes, accepts a new life, and lives like there's no tomorrow because he knows there really is a God and it really does matter!

It's never too late for us to repent as individuals, as the church, as a nation, as a world, to rend our hearts and not our clothing, to return to the Lord, our God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

God hasn't given up on us. Which is why this day is about more than just ashes and bugs. God has sent Jesus to die for us, to live for us.

Will we accept the blessing that's coming our way? Will we show others the same grace God has shown to us?

When the prophets talk about the coming end, they're not only reminding God's people that the Day of the Lord is bad news for sinners, they also talk about a delay — a delay just long enough for us to repent, and go forward to do God's work.

That's certainly what the prophet Joel is telling us. While God's people look forward to the end as a day when their enemies will get what's coming to them, Joel challenges them to look within their own hearts, to repent, and restore justice and righteousness in the land.

This is the heart of Ash Wednesday. What matters is that today you begin a journey for Jesus with Jesus, through his death toward his resurrection.

While there's still time.