

**“A BYWORD AMONG THE NATIONS”**

*Joel 2:1-2, 12-17*

Homily by Mack Dennis, Pastor

I remember my grandmother sharing vivid memories of air raid drills in the 1940s. The sirens would blare throughout the town. Everyone would go inside their homes or their shelters and turn off every light, to prevent any potential bombers from seeing their targets at night. Even lighting a cigarette was forbidden, since the glowing embers could give away your location. These stories always captivated me because they were so terrifyingly different from the kinds of emergency drills I knew as a child—typical fire and tornado drills. These always happened at school. But I’ve never experienced a drill for an entire city.

If it were up to the prophet Joel, we’d all be hearing the sirens this evening. The classic, bone-chilling, blood-curdling, hair-raising kind of hand-crank siren that has a universal ability to evoke an immediate response. Well, there is Joel, cranking away, making it wail throughout the land. In his time, there was an impending catastrophe—a foreign enemy on the horizon. God’s judgement was waiting for them just on the other side of the mountain. Joel describes at great length the enemy army’s power and capacity to destroy their civilization. If he were telling this at night, we’d have nightmares of enemy soldiers, their faces set like flint, scaling the walls, bursting through front doors, crawling through windows. The earth quaking. Sun and moon darkened. There would be no escape.

The only way to stop this from happening was not to take shelter, not to close the doors and turn off the lights, but to repent. “Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, with mourning.” There is no use in rote obedience. No superficial displays of piety. God’s mind is made up. God will change God’s mind only on the other side of a broken and contrite heart—a genuine and thorough repentance of sin.

Because the threat is immediate, the repentance must be as well. There is no time to waste. “Blow the trumpet in Zion,” Joel cries. “Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly...” Get the young and the old. Are you just a kid? You need to be here. Immobile or infirm? We’ll call Mountain Mobility. A nursing mother? Bring a diaper bag. On your honeymoon? Congratulations! You two lovebirds get your starry eyes over here, unless you want to spend your first week of marriage in the smoldering remains of your honeymoon suite.

The immediacy of Joel’s call reminds me of Jesus’ call to turn around and follow him. As Luke tells it, Jesus and the disciples were going along, when Jesus said to someone, “Follow me.” But the person said, “I would, but my father just died and the funeral’s tomorrow.” And Jesus responds with what would make for a very poor Valentine’s Day Card message: “Let the dead bury their own dead.” Another said they’d follow him, “But let me say bye to my folks.” Jesus replies, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for God’s kingdom.”

As St. Augustine said of his own delays, he would pray, “Lord, make me chaste. But not yet!” But there can be no scheduling repentance—it doesn’t work like a New Year’s resolution, “I’ll start on January 1<sup>st</sup>!” No, Joel calls us to repentance now. *Cold turkey* repentance.

Once Joel has corralled the city around the altar in their hair rollers and bath robes, he compels the assembly to weep, and to beg God to do a very specific thing: “Do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations” (Joel 2:17). Translation, “God, you have been with us, brought us all this way. Don’t make a joke of us in front of everyone.”

A friend told me about a haunting conversation she had with someone who rejects the church. The person said to my friend, “You know, I’m just tired of Christians doing the same thing as everyone else and calling it different.” It’s a stinging judgment. We claim to follow the savior of the world, a savior who gave himself completely to us, who does miracles among us, who feeds us, heals us, regales us with sermons and parables unlike anything the world has heard before or since. A Savior who calls us to sell all we have and live by a different economy than the world’s. A savior who blesses all the wrong kinds of people. Poor people. Sad people. Meek people. Persecuted people. Strangers, aliens, and outcasts. A Savior whose message and way of life whips the religious types and the government leaders into a frenzy. A savior who, with nails through his wrists and ankles, says to his executioners, “You are forgiven.” And to the criminal beside him, not, “You deserve this,” but, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

When the church fails to live up to this particular Jesus, we not only become a byword, a joke, a *taunt* to the watching world, we also simply begin to disappear. The prophet Joel’s challenge to Israel, and now to the Church, is not simply, “Thou shalt not...” Rather, Joel calls us to recognize that our existence as the people of God hangs on the sincerity of our repentance. To acknowledge our brokenness, to fess up to our sins, to recognize our complicity in the sin of the world, is to begin to *appear* as God’s people in the world. Simply put, to confess is to *exist*.

Over the past weeks and months, we have heard many apologies from men to women who’ve been sexually assaulted or abused. I have noticed, though, that many of these apologies have been half-hearted and deceptive. One actor on a popular Netflix show, as well as many movies, apologized to his accuser only after first denying he did anything wrong. Then he finally offered one of these familiar non-apologies: “I apologize *if* I hurt anyone...” Of course, that word “if” has the effect not only of disappearing the apology, but of attempting to disappear the pain of the victim.

We have the seeds of such non-apologies in all of us. But on Ash Wednesday, we are compelled to take the “if” out of our repentant posture, and say with a full heart, “I am sorry. I am broken. I am a sinner. And without God, I am nothing more than a withering blade of grass, a fading flower, chaff driven away by the wind. I am *dust*.”

The question we ask ourselves tonight is, “Does our church exist?” Does our repentance lead to visibility? When the watching world sees our life together, do they see the radical, earth-shaking, world-turning, sincerely-confessing, life-changing Jesus, Son of God, Savior of the World? Or do they see right through us and back to themselves?

The good news is that God marks us with a holy sign tonight, the sign of dust and ashes, the sign of the cross. May these ashes be like glowing embers in a night raid, giving away our location, so that we may glorify God in all things in life, and, yes, even in death. By this sign, may the world see us and believe our witness is genuine and true. In this present darkness, when the world urgently needs the visibility of the true church, may the shape of these ashes make us visible as God's people. And, may God craft our whole life together into this very same shape.

