

Dust and Ashes | Ash Wednesday | Joel 2:12-19
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These ashes are messy aren't they? They get everywhere. They get on our fingers and noses. They get in our hair and on our clothes. What was intended to be a cross often turns out to be a vaguely cross-shaped smudge. Ash falls down off the forehead and makes its way to the nose. We forget it's there, wiping our forehead, touching our nose. You know what I mean. Before we're home for the night we've got ashes everywhere. On our forehead, on our nose, our hands, our clothes. These ashes are messy, aren't they?

Yes, they are messy and rightfully so. They are messy because the ashes, well, they represent *our* messiness. They represent our mortality - a reminder that "we are dust and to dust we shall return". And the ashes are messy because they remind us of the stain that is our sin. And our sin is, indeed, messy.

In our sin we have hurt ourselves. We have hurt others. We have damaged relationships. We have distanced ourselves from God. Our sin is messy.

The sin of Judah was messy too. The prophet Joel doesn't really get into the exact sins of the people but what we do know is that they had turned from God. They had their own agenda for their lives and that was their priority. They had replaced the will of God with their own wills and their own desires. And it got messy. It got really messy.

Joel describes an invasion into the land of Israel in chapter one of the book that bears his name. It's an invasion of locusts. And the land was absolutely devastated because of it. Joel says:

Everything was gone. Vineyards, trees, crops. All of it laid to waste. And as if that weren't bad enough, the army of locusts begins to give way to an army from another invading nation. An unimaginable army, stronger than anyone has ever seen was knocking on their door. Things were messy for the Israelites.

But then the prophet Joel speaks on behalf of God, calling Judah to repent. He calls on Jerusalem to turn away from their own agenda and turn back towards God. Turn, or return, this is the most basic and fundamental word for repentance in the Old Testament. We can imagine God's people walking in one direction and then, as they repent, they begin walking in a *new* direction, in the *opposite* direction. That is Joel's call to the people.

In verses, (***) of our text, YHWH, through Joel, calls the people to gather together, to bring the entire community and nation together, for what you might call a National Day of Repentance. Young and old, infants and newlyweds, everyone is to gather together in order that they might turn away from the messiness of their sin.

For with this repentance comes blessings. With this repentance comes a restoration of their land. But most importantly, with this repentance comes a right relationship with their God. For God is not an angry, wrathful judge who is out to get them or looking to destroy them. No, God is gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

Too often we see the God of the Old Testament as crotchety, always man, and lacking even the slightest bit of compassion. But in actuality, this formula, this creed of God's personality, the God of the OT. God's desire is for His covenant people to be brought back into a right relationship with Him. So Israel may repent, they may turn back to God, and be welcomed with open arms.

This call by God to his people through the prophet, well, this is exactly what God calls *us* to do this season of Lent as well. We have seen, and indeed bear the mark of the messiness of our sin. So then, we rightfully hear the cry of the prophet Joel to turn and repent. He calls on us this evening to call together a solemn assembly. To bring everyone together. Young, old, new member, long-time member. And, as we gather together as a community, we repent. We return to the Lord and his will for our life together.

So we gather together this lenten season in order that we might turn from our agendas and wills and desires and turn towards God's. And we do so intentionally. We do so by engaging in The Red Letter Challenge. Repentance and returning to God is exactly what The Red Letter Challenge is all about.

If there was any way to turn from ourselves and turn toward God, it's to immerse ourselves in the "red letters" of the Bible - the words of Jesus Himself. For it's in Jesus that we see, in flesh and blood, in full living color, that God is indeed gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. For this God sent his only-begotten Son to take on our flesh and be our Savior. This God, who is slow to anger, took all of our sins upon Himself in Christ.

This God who is abounding in steadfast love, that is in covenant faithfulness, set forth a new covenant in the blood of Jesus. That all who look to Him, all who look to Christ, will find new and eternal life.

And so in the RLC we look to Jesus. We repent, we turn from our own agenda, our own busy mornings or exhausted evenings, and we take a moment. Maybe 5 minutes, maybe 10 minutes, and we put aside our own agenda and we let Jesus take over. Jesus takes over and shows us that being with him is more important than anything we can ever do. That he lavishes us with forgiveness and grace. And that we are called to lay down our own lives by serving others, by giving sacrificially, by going out into a world that needs to hear of our gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love God.

The RLC will ask some difficult things of us. It will challenge us to get outside of our comfort zones. But I pray that as we do so, I pray that God will stretch us and grow us.

That he will build up our faith in Him as we see what happens when His Word goes forth from this place.

So, this Lent as we take up the RLC, we are heading our Lord's call. Repent from the messiness of our sin. Repent from our own agendas. Turn towards him. Listen to his word and put that word into action each day.

Why? Not because God threatens us with punishment. But because God is gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. We repent and turn towards Jesus because in Christ God has shown himself to be just that. And when we repent and turn towards him we rest in his great promises.