

Sermon – “Second Chance”

Wednesday, March 6, 2019

Scripture Reading: Joel 2:1, 12-17, Psalm 139:1-14, 23-24

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First Scripture Reading: Joel 2:1, 12-17 (ICB & NRSV)

Blow the trumpet in Zion; Shout a warning on my holy mountain! Let all the people who live in the land shake with fear. The Lord's day of judging is coming, it is near --- The Lord says, "Now, come back to me with all your heart. Go without food, and cry and be sad." Tearing your clothes is not enough to show you are sad. Let your heart be broken. Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. He would rather forgive than punish. Who knows? Maybe the Lord will have change of mind and leave behind a blessing for you. Then you may give grain and drink offerings to the Lord your God. Blow the trumpet in Jerusalem. Call for a special time of going without food. Call for a special meeting. Bring the people together. Make the meeting holy for the Lord. Bring together the elders. Bring together the children, even babies that still feed at their mothers' breasts. The bridegroom should come from his room. The bride should come from her bedroom. The priests, the Lord's servants, should cry. They should cry between the altar and entrance to the Temple. They should say, "Lord, have mercy on your people. Don't let them be put to shame. Don't let other nations make fun of them. Don't let people in other nations ask, 'Where is their God?'"

Second Scripture Reading: Psalm 139:1-14, 23-24 (ICB & NRSV)

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I get up. You know my thoughts before I think them. You know where I go and where I lie down. You know well everything I do. Lord, even before I say a word, you already know what I am going to say. You are all around me—in front and in back. You have put your hand on me. Your knowledge is amazing to me. It is more than I can understand. Where can I go to get away from your Spirit? Where can I run from you? If I go up to the skies, you are there. If I lie down where the dead are, you are there. If I rise with the sun in the east, and settle in the west beyond the sea, even there you would guide me. With your right hand you would hold me. I could say, "The darkness will hide me. The light around me will turn into night." But even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is as light as the day. Darkness and light are the same to you. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; I know this very well. God, examine me and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any bad thing in me. Lead me in the way everlasting. Amen.

Friends, tonight we begin a new mini-journey together. For the next 40 days and nights, we will join other Christ followers around the globe on a Lenten journey, remembering Jesus' fasting and prayer for 40 days and night prior to being tempted in the wilderness¹. As we look forward to the spring and my personal favorite day of the year, Easter, we too, will be faced with temptations and trials on the journey ahead. Some of the obvious trials we can see down the road are such as the cold temperatures we are dealing with currently as we wait patiently for the warmer spring (officially in 14 days); and voluntarily giving up of 1 hour of sleep this weekend as we welcome the Daylight Savings time.²

As we enter into the season of Lent - a time of reflection, prayer, and seeking forgiveness - we can think of today much like an annual physical for our faith. Each year when we have our doctor's appointment for physical, we go into office regardless of our current condition: one can be healthy, kind-of-healthy, or maybe in need of an advice. Before we go into the doctor's office, we think through the changes in our health and conditions that took place since the last time we were in the doctor's office. When the doctor asks, "How you been?", we have a choice to make. We can either: 1) hide our conditions and ignore them, or 2) be honest and share every embarrassing detail of what we might be going through.

Tonight, we as the body of Christ, humbly approach the presence of God as our Lord and Savior asks each of us, "How you been?" Regardless of our spiritual health status, this is a time of a year at the church we get a check-up. By the way, Westminster is a comprehensive coverage church: the seventh biennial health fair is this Sunday. We care for your physical and your spiritual needs. Many thanks go out to our volunteers and parish nurse, Ellen Carpenter. During this time of Lent, like when visiting a doctor, we also have a choice; well, sort of. We can choose to ignore our wrongdoings, cover-up our human condition, and tell God that we are simply doing well spiritually; by coming to church, doing our part to help others, and praying before the meals. Or we can be honest and share with God about the guilty or even perhaps good feeling we had after doing something wrong, what we thought were the righteous reasons to not love our neighbors, and even those times when we completely forgotten that God is with us 24/7, 365 days a year.

Well, it is my pastoral, professional recommendation, in line with today's Scripture readings, that we might as well come clean before our Redeemer. Joel 2 asks us to rend our hearts, not our appearance; to return to God with all our hearts, and not to show off of our devotion through what we wear or how we act. Psalm 139 tells us that God searched and knows all of us. Omniscient God knows our thoughts before we think about what we are going to do. Omnipresent God knows where we are, wherever we might be. When we think we hid ourselves unseen in a dark place, omnipotent God has power to make darkness go away. Creator God knit us together, before anyone in the world knew us, and knows each of us so intimately that our Shepherd calls us by our names. By not answering God honestly, who already knows all about us, we would simply add one more thing that we did that we are not supposed to do!

By being honest with ourselves, we will discover that there are many cracks and brokenness in us. We experience the fullness of God's grace, love, and mercy when we expose our sins, the brokenness, and the wrongdoings. Our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, who relents from punishing!³ We live with God's promise that whatever we ask in prayer as we seek

¹ Luke 4:1-13

² Daylight Savings time goes in effect March 10, 2019.

³ Joel 2:13

God's will, our petition will be heard and be given to us⁴. God has sent Jesus to us in order to reconcile us and the world to the heavenly Father, not to forsake it.⁵ That would mean that there will be forgiveness when we ask, for it is God's will that we are re-membered, meaning made again as a body of Christ. Therefore, we can confidently go out today knowing that we are forgiven – we are a new creation – we are people who have received a second chance to do what is right in God's eyes. To help us remember where we have been in our brokenness and where we are now as a reconciled children of God, we are marked with the ashes of last year's palms. One could say it is like a sticker that kids receive at the doctor's office, reminding them of good treatment they have received. But for us – the redeemed, it is also a reminder of the sacrifice that Jesus made for all of us. Christ, whom entered Jerusalem as a Savior had to die to take our sins and take our place on the cross. Jesus was praised through the waving of palm leaves and people laid them on the ground in the streets of Jerusalem to welcome Jesus. Now those same leaves have been turned into ashes to remind us that Jesus will give up all that praise and adoration to save us. Jesus' love is so great that he would die in our place. The ashes we mark ourselves tonight becomes a symbol to show others that we have been saved through Christ's love.

Unfortunately, even during these 40 days, even though we have committed our lives to be on this mini journey together to live according to God's love and teachings, we will need God's forgiveness again. There will be moments when we will sin and do thing knowing it is wrong. But God reminds all of us again: God knows who we are. God knows our limits. Even though we might fail to live the way we ought to, God is a champion of second chances. God will reach out to us when we fall, comfort us when we are mourning, and when we attempt to do righteous things, God will help us, and gives another chance to do it right.⁶

During this season of Lent, let us not only pray for ourselves, but also those who are around us. To love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves is the command that we been given. As we are knitted by God's in our mother's womb, we are also knitted together into a body of Christ. We are covered by knitted prayers of others around us. As we journey together, let us ask our God of many second chances to renew our spirit, strengthen us to what is right, and help us be good neighbors in prayer. Amen.

⁴ Mark 11:24, Matthew 7:7

⁵ John 3:16-17

⁶ Matthew 5:2-12