

ASH WEDNESDAY

LECTIONARY #219

READING I Joel 2:12-18

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Joel

Even now, says the LORD,
return to me with your **whole heart**,
with **fasting**, and **weeping**, and **mourning**;

Rend your hearts, **not your garments**,
and return to the LORD, your **God**.

For gracious and merciful is he,
slow to anger, rich in kindness,
and relenting in punishment.

Perhaps he will again relent
and leave behind him a blessing,

Offerings and libations
for the LORD, **your God**.

Blow the **trumpet in Zion!**

proclaim a fast,
call an assembly;

Gather the people,
notify the congregation;

Assemble the elders,
gather the children
and the **infants** at the breast;

Let the **bridegroom** quit his room
and the **bride** her chamber.

Joel = JOH-*I

The Lord loves us and wants us back.
Proclaim with tenderness.

Our God is a good God. Let us hear kindness
as you describe him. Use strong eye contact.

Zion = Zī-uhn or Zī-ahn

The stakes are high. Put more intensity and
energy in your voice.

READING I

Joel addresses the entire community in his prophetic call to repentance. The prophecy begins with the Lord saying to the people, "Return to me with your whole heart." The whole heart refers not only to the entire heart of each individual, but even more to the heart of the people as a whole. Israel's heart is the living, beating center of the people, their emotions, their thinking and choosing, their collective sin. Returning to the Lord with their whole heart means a complete transformation of their lives.

After the Lord's opening plea, the prophet expands on the call to repentance, and simultaneously reminds the people of the Lord's identity. The people of Israel know the visible signs of repentance, since they were commonly practiced. Their external acts such as fasting, mourning, weeping, and rending of garments are symbolic of their interior contrition. But externals are not enough. When people rend their hearts, they are turning their emotions, thoughts, and actions toward the generous and merciful God who long ago had spoken to Moses. In fact, Joel's description of God echoes that

of Moses, as both patriarch and prophet reveal that the God of the covenant is slow to anger, rich in kindness, and turns away from punishment. In a twofold movement that reestablishes the covenant relationship, the people turn away from sin, and the merciful God turns away from punishing them.

A few verses before today's reading, Joel had commanded, "Blow the trumpet in Zion," telling the sentinels on the wall to raise the alarm for war. The ram's horn would announce God's punishment on the sinful people. Now Joel issues the same command, "Blow the trumpet in Zion," this

Pause before you proclaim "Spare, O LORD,"
and use good volume.

Use a gentler tone.

For meditation and context:

Between the porch and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep,
And say, "Spare, O LORD, your people,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
with the nations ruling over them!
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?' "

Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land
and took pity on his people.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14 and 17 (3a)

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe
out my offense.

Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.

For I acknowledge my offense,
and my sin is before me always:
"Against you only have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight."

A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Cast me not out from your presence,
and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

READING II 2 Corinthians 5:20—6:2

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians

Brothers and sisters:

We are ambassadors for Christ,
as if God were appealing through us.

We implore you on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled to God.

For **our** sake he made him to **be sin** who did **not** know sin,
so that **we** might become the righteousness of God in him. >>

Corinthians = kohr-IN-thee-uhnz

Proclaim with authority.

Make your voice stronger on these lines.

time for the people to announce their repentance. The communal nature of their repentance means the participation of everyone: elders and children, bride and bridegroom, priests and assembly. Together they chant, "Spare, O Lord, your people." Because God's compassion is greater than the people's sin, the Lord takes pity on them, transforming their repentant heart. True to the divine nature, the Lord acts with graciousness and mercy.

READING II "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

and Timothy our brother." In these opening words of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he presents himself and his coworker Timothy as apostles of Christ Jesus. In today's reading, he adds a complementary designation: ambassador of Christ. Apostles and ambassadors act with authority and as representatives of the one who sent them, Christ himself. Commissioned by God, they speak in Christ's name (2:13), the mercy of God sustains their ministry (4:1), and they are impelled by the love of Christ (5:14).

Their ministry as ambassadors acting in and for Christ is to continue Christ's own mission of reconciling the world to himself. Used in the military sphere, the term *reconciliation* implies that the fighting between armies and nations has ended with the possibility of a new positive relationship. Reconciliation in Christ likewise brings about an end to divisions and fractured relationships. Yet reconciliation in Christ is far greater than that seen in a military or political context. There, reconciliation can stop wars or conflict, but doesn't imply transformation of the enemies' hearts, and

Use good eye contact.

Proclaim with urgency in your tone.

Jesus is telling us how to act. Take your time and articulate the words in bold.

This is how we are to pray. Do not rush your words. Use strong volume.

Working together, then,
we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.
For he says:

*In an acceptable time I heard you,
and on the day of salvation I helped you.*

Behold, now is a very acceptable time;
behold, now is the day of **salvation**.

GOSPEL Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

Jesus said to his **disciples**:

“Take **care not** to perform righteous deeds
in order that people may **see** them;
otherwise, you will have **no** recompense from your
heavenly **Father**.

When you **give alms**,
do **not blow** a **trumpet** before you,
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets
to win the praise of **others**.

Amen, I say to you,
they have received their reward.

But when you give alms,
do **not** let your left hand know what your right is doing,
so that **your** almsgiving may be secret.

And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

“When you **pray**,
do **not** be like the hypocrites,
who love to stand and **pray** in the synagogues and on street
corners
so that others may **see** them.

wars often break out again. By reconciliation in Christ, the people become a new creation, and the old things have passed away (5:17). With their sins forgiven, reconciled people now have a renewed, transformed relationship with God and with one another.

How is such reconciliation accomplished? One verse provides at least a partial answer to this question. God “made him to be sin who did not know sin so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” Christ, fully human and sinless himself, has taken the place of sinful humanity. His death on the cross is a sacrificial act

that reconciles, transforms, and restores the fractured relationship between God and humanity. This past deed has present implications. The saving death of Christ is “so that we might become the righteousness of God,” with each believer continuing Christ’s ministry of reconciliation, living in and empowered by the grace of God.

GOSPEL Today’s Gospel is taken from the central section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the first of his five sermons in Matthew’s Gospel. From the mountain, Jesus presents his authorita-

tive interpretation of the law he came to fulfill, and explains how his disciples are to live in light of his teaching. In this part of the sermon, he instructs them about the Jewish practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, and warns against performing them in order to gain human honor and reward.

The first deed Jesus describes is giving alms to those in need, as commanded in the Torah and reinforced by the prophets and sages: “Happy those who are kind to the poor” (Proverbs 15:21). While almsgiving is clearly commendable, those who “blow the trumpet,” whether literally or