

“So What Are You Doing for Lent?”

Joel 2:12-17

2/28/10

We must have a willing heart, to step out into the Light of the Son, God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Merely “doing” something new, or adjusting the dials of our minds is not enough. We must tear open our hearts before God. This is a time to be restored, to discover once again the joy of God’s salvation.

“Rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Call all the people together and return to me with all your heart, says the Lord. He is calling a nation, a people, His people, back unto Himself. There is no longer time for mere ritual. There is no one who is exempt. Now is the time.

Why have we gathered here this day? For what purpose have we entered this sanctuary? The world out there from whence we came is busy, moving, bustling about. There is so much going on, the noisy endless activities of the day. Yet beneath the rough, even callous exterior of the daily grind lies the inner thoughts and emotions of the people—the worries, joys, daydreams, fears, and ambitions which drive them, yet perhaps no one ever hears. And yet, down deeper, even beneath all of that, as a quiet yet powerful undercurrent, lies the true passions, loves, and deepest yearnings of our spirits, where true life exists. It is that part of our selves which, though often quiet, desires more than anything to be set free and given meaning. It is there that God now calls us to go.

As a parent, I can relate to this story Ken Canfield shares about his two daughters. He says, “During a family vacation, Sarah got a little ornery and pushed Hannah. ‘Did you push your sister?’ I asked.

“‘No,’ she denied. Since this was becoming a growing pattern for Sarah, I decided to take a walk with her to get to the bottom of things.

“‘Sarah,’ I told her, ‘I’m really disappointed with your behavior. What do you need to do about it?’”

He says, “I expected Sarah to tell me she needed to stop lying or apologize to her sister, but instead, with tears in her eyes, she said, ‘I need to ask Jesus to come into my heart.’”

Canfield says, “There I was, zeroing on behavior modification, and my 6-year-old daughter was dealing with the bigger issues of needing forgiveness, cleansing, and internal spiritual change. I was focused on morality, she on the spirituality that makes morality possible and sincere.”

“Rend your hearts and not your clothing.”

God calls us to tear open our hearts before Him.

Believe it or not, Lent is upon us—the time, beginning with Ash Wednesday, when we re-examine our relationship with Jesus Christ and the transformation He brings to our lives by His amazing grace shown to us on the Cross and in His Resurrection, when we allow God to reveal those places in our lives that need His forgiveness and healing.

And as so often is true, there is something to be learned from a 6-year-old’s perspective on all of this. Many times we talk about those “things” we are “giving up” for Lent.

My daughter Sara said she is giving up chocolate. My son, Zach? Vegetables. Maybe it's television, bad language, or other "indulgences". Or perhaps we discuss what we will "do" for Lent—pray more, read the Bible more, fast, or go to church.

To be sure, all those are good things to do. But before we do or don't do anything we must stop and truly hear the Word of the Lord, that we would "rend our hearts and not our clothing". Through the prophet Joel God calls His people to repentance. "Yet even now, return to me with all your heart." God calls His people to something more, to go deep, to not merely tear your clothing in mourning as would have been custom, but to tear open your hearts. It's time to change, to really change, which can only happen when we are wide open before God.

God calls us to dive below the surface, to tear open our hearts, to go to the source of why we do what we do, to allow God to transform who we are. Before Jesus began His ministry, He was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. Jesus responded to the devil's temptations with three clear points: Feed on God's Word; Trust God and let Him lead; Worship and serve only God. When those are happening in our lives then God will clearly be the center.

When God is the center of our lives then the changes He makes in us will be spiritual—a transformation of who we are, not just what we do.

The rest will follow.

This journey we take to Easter with God is one Jesus took in His life, giving His life for all. It was all about the greater vision, the dream God has for His creation—that we live in His fullness of life, in loving relationship with Him.

We here at Oakland have talked some about vision. You have shared with us some of the dreams you have for the church. And I trust that God is the one who is directing it all. Because you and I being called to rend our hearts before God is not just something good for you and me personally.

This is about all of us living into the dream God has for us.

I fear that much of what we do, we as Christian men and women, as Christ's Church, has become ritual, even routine. I fear, that in our busy and diverse nation, our lives have become full of all the things we "do", yet void of what we truly are—children of God.

God calls His people, the nation of Israel to repent, to turn back toward Him and they would be blessed for it. We, too, are a nation that needs to repent. I remember a conversation I had a few years ago with an old friend, a retired physician that I worked with at a psychiatric hospital in PA. He still spends some time there, and was filling me in on some of the changes happening there. One thing that has changed? There are even more children there than were before. In fact, he said, there are so many children that need that intense a care that they are taking up most of the space in the hospital—at least are spreading out into other areas of the hospital.

"It's a sign of the times," my friend said. And I could not agree more. For every child in the hospital there are probably many more who need that kind of help. Why? Why are they filled with such anger and violence and depression and loneliness? It is a true reflection and result of who we are as a nation. We are too busy, too violent, fearful of our neighbor and focused on the self. We truly have strayed away from Whom we were founded upon.

What does this have to do with us here this morning? The changes that need to happen begin right here, with you and with me. It begins with me rending my heart before God. It begins with the Church leading the Way back to God. Has, as the prophet Joel says, “God’s heritage” become “a mockery... a byword among the nations”? Have God’s people and all that we are about become something of a joke, some old-fashioned belief system that no longer has any impact on our lives and the world around us?

We scrape away the snow, but the ground is still frozen. Things look different on the surface, but have we truly changed deep within?

So much of our society is about what we do, don’t do, have, look like, how much we make. And I think that often, we change, shuffle, adjust one of these things thinking that we are truly making a change.

But God says, “Rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Something needs to change, change deep within. We must allow God to go deep—and here is the Good News—not because God wants to see us squirm, but because He loves you and me. *“For He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”*

Psalm 51:10-12 says, *“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”*

Restore to me the joy of your salvation. Yes, that is what it’s all about.

This is a time to be restored, to discover once again the joy of God’s salvation.

This has been a pretty difficult winter for many of us. It has been cold, white, frozen. Perhaps this has kept some of you from really getting out much and doing the things you need to do. Perhaps you are feeling the strain of not seeing much of the sun. You can tell how much I have enjoyed it!

Many times our lives can become covered over with the cold frost of sin and despair. Soon it will be Spring. Yet, to know its warmth we must be willing to step out into the Son. “Grant me a willing spirit”, says the psalmist, willing to return to God with all my heart. “Return to the Lord, your God... Rend your hearts and not your clothing.” We must have a willing heart, to step out into the Light of the Son, God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Merely “doing” something new, or adjusting the dials of our minds is not enough. We must tear open our hearts before God. We must allow God to get to the heart of the matter.

This is a call to all the people—all the congregation, the old, the young, the infants, the bride and groom, the priests, the ministers of the people. God is calling all His people to fall on our knees before Him with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts and not your clothing.

So what are you doing for Lent?

Prayer...silence