

WELCOME 6th March 2019 – Ash Wednesday '19 C

Psalm 32:3-8 and Joel 1:11-20; 2:1-3 & 12-18

Good evening & Welcome to worship on this Ash Wednesday!

You've seen the images...all too familiar on our TV screens & newspapers: Agricultural land in this country turned into a dust bowl.

Carcasses of livestock, with no feed scarce water...scattered on the ground or sold for pennies just to keep them alive somewhere else.

Trees that have survived for hundreds of years, dry and dead.

The land barren.

Hope disappearing.

Despair & fear spreading

But droughts come on the inside too. Hearts can feel dry & barren. Lives can be thirsty or starved. Your soul can feel as parched as the unforgiving outback. Maybe your interior landscape has no flowing water, no colour, no fragrance, no softness or beauty - just barrenness and desolation? Fear? Despair? Or Just Nothing...?

In the season of Lent Jesus invites us to walk with him through those dry & dusty places in our lives...To sit with him in the emptiness and listen for his voice. For in the place of barrenness, God is speaking...to you. First the truth: *"You are dust & to dust you shall return."*

But then...A word of refreshing. A word of forgiveness. A word of hope & promise... A word of a future harvest and a future glory that are yours even now.

"Then the Lord will pity his people & jealously guard the honor of his land...I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons & daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, & your young men will see visions. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants—men & women alike...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved..."

Please stand as we sing...

ASH WEDNESDAY '19 C – AT THE TABLE: A PLACE OF BARRENNESS

Joel is a prophet about whom we know very little. Who? When? Where? Hard to say.

He identifies himself as “*Joel son of Pethuel*” & says simply he received a word a message from Yahweh/the Lord. But among all the family trees Scripture records... They're not there. Joel gives us no details about when this word/message from God came to him. He lists no kings, names no other nations, no ruling powers, no priestly leadership. It's assumed he writes in or around Jerusalem because of his references to the Temple & the city itself, but even that is at best an assumption.

But that lack of a specific context...the absence of pinpoint precision in tying his word/message from God to a moment in time...tells me *THIS* word – *THIS* message from God is timeless...is for now...is for me/you/us.

His prophecy is at 1st descriptive. He describes a time of crisis – high anxiety – great distress. It's an agricultural nightmare. Locusts. Drought. Fire. Agricultural failures on an enormous scale. Unprecedented & unparalleled in scope is the devastation. Every sector experiences ruin like never before. Where have we heard that before?

Then he describes a national emergency...political upheaval - military crisis...He sees massing armies, sabre rattling – invasion threats – massive build-up of forces – brinkmanship – territorial disputes. The very life & integrity of the nation at stake. Where have we heard that before?

But what strikes me...just stops my heart mid-beat...The word from God – the message through the prophet is not about greenhouse gasses or climate change or better agri-technology or gov't intervention in the ag-sector. This word that Joel delivers with such force & clarity is not about new treaties or international alliances or disarmament of redoubled military spending...He says you need a new relationship – you need to respond wholeheartedly to God – you need to recognize your full dependence on Yahweh. Joel sees barrenness & dryness & waste & desolation & hopelessness & despair...

And he calls for faith – for repentance – for a re-orientation of hearts & lives according to God's Word & God's will & God's work among his people. To see the pain in their lives as a plea from the Father to stop & come home. He pleads with those around him to acknowledge their own fault – their own sin – their own mistrust – their own rebellion & its effect on their lives.

Joel knows the truth: sin breaks everything. Sin corrupts everything. Sin distorts everything. It not only taints our very worst but it rots us in our very best. *Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death & decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.* Locusts & drought. Flood & fire. Nation against nation. Neighbour against neighbour. Disaster & accident. Tragedy & malice aforethought. Pride & arrogance. Self-indulgence & self-aggrandizement & self-loathing. The cause is all the same. All creation suffers the curse of human rebellion against God. Humans say “We Want!” God answers, “Have it your way” & sin breaks everything.

Broken people living out brokenness in a broken world...What would we expect? All bear the burden of sin...“*You are dust & to dust you shall return.*”

All bear the burden of sin & all long to be free. “*Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, & mourning. Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead.*” *Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful & compassionate, slow to get angry & filled with unfailing love. He is eager to relent & not punish.* All bear the burden of sin & all long to be free & The Father longs to forgive – to welcome home - to heal & to restore. The Father takes no joy in the child he has made for his love living & dying distant from him. The Father has no pleasure in the death/destruction of the rebellious whom he created to live in his presence. The Father delights in showing mercy. The Father rejoices in forgiveness. The Father pursues us not with the whip hand but with love that is relentless & persistent & unyielding... And is seen most clearly in the Son who suffered & died for us & whose resurrection claims us as his own. *You were dead because of your sins & because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He destroyed the record of the debt charged against us. He cancelled it by nailing it to the cross. - Col 2:13-14*

Lent isn't about punishing ourselves for being human/sinful – or hating ourselves in the hope that self-hatred is enough to appease/please God. Lent is about peeling away layers of insulation & evasion which keep us from the truth of God's word. Lent is about hacking through self-delusion & false promises. We let go of all the pretenses & the destructive independence from God. We let go of defending or explaining ourselves. Then, like the prodigal son we see God running with abandon to welcome us home. But we can't begin to see the Father until we die to our arrogance & certainty & cynicism.

“Then the Lord will pity his people & jealously guard the honor of his land...I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons & daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, & your young men will see visions. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants—men & women alike...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved...”

God is not ashamed of who are...He loves us still. God isn't ready to cast us off but seeks to free us from the sin from which we cannot free ourselves. He seeks to fill us with his presence & his power & make our lives radiant with his promises...each and every one kept in Jesus Christ.

Into our dry & barren dying God speaks..

I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland. The wild animals in the fields will thank me, the jackals & owls, too, for giving them water in the desert. Yes, I will make rivers in the dry wasteland so my chosen people can be refreshed. I have made my people for myself, & they will someday honor me before the whole world. – Is 43:19-21

On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood & shouted to the crowds, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come & drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from their heart.’” – Jn 7:37-38