

Sound the Alarm: Ash Wednesday 2017

Are we still able to sound the alarm when it's necessary? When Joel says to sound the alarm on the Holy Mountain I imagine ancient tribal people literally blowing a horn or a trumpet because a dangerous enemy was approaching. Or I think of Englishmen turning crankshaft sirens to warn everyone that German bombers were on their way. These things got people's attention because there was an imminent, external threat. Wake up; get ready.

But today there is no army approaching. There are no warplanes in the air; there is no hurricane bearing down on us. And yet our readings today proclaim an incredible urgency.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, Joel says. Sound the alarm. Call a solemn assembly, gather the people. Get everyone together: the children, the aged. Infants at the breast; bride and bridegroom.

That this call is to *everyone* is one of the most audacious parts of the whole passage. Can you imagine that kind of a call in today's world? Where absolutely everyone was supposed to show up, because absolutely everyone was responsible to their neighbors and to God?

This is less of a call to man the barricades and more of an announcement of a family meeting, but it is no less urgent for that. We've been summoned together because we as a people, and we as individuals, have failed one another and have fallen down in our commitments of fidelity and love.

The beautiful thing is that we can return to the covenant. That's the whole point: God desires not our punishment, but our redemption. God wants us to live lives filled with dignity and wisdom and grace, but we have moved in another direction so it's time for an intervention.

Everyone is supposed to show up for this assembly. Gather the people, Joel says; that means *all* the people. No one lives outside the reach of the trumpets, no one is above the need to repent, rebuild, and reaffirm our bonds of affection to God and one another. No one is too old: the aged are the first to be called to the assembly. No one is too young: when Joel calls for the children and infants to be gathered I hear a plea not to wait until they are grown, or old enough to "understand" before we teach them what repentance means. No, he says...bring them here, now.

This family meeting has been called so that we can approach God with penitence and hope; that God might forgive us, and make in us new and contrite hearts. This is urgent; our lives may not be in danger but our souls are diminished, tempted as we all are by the seductions of our world. We are self-indulgent. We are envious. We treat other human beings as objects. We love worldly goods and comforts more than we love justice. We are neglectful in worship. We are judgmental and scornful of others. We are wasteful and careless in our pollution of God's creation. We let money rule our lives. We have not loved God with our whole hearts. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

And so... Sound the alarm, gather the people, because more than anything else we hunger to return to God, to have new hearts formed within us.

Now, As Christians we know that fasting is central to this life of transformation. Fasting is not something we practice much anymore, outside of church. Giving things up is painful. But very rarely do things change without something painful happening: either as a shock to our system, or through a disciplined practice of going without: whether that's things, or power, or the baggage of our lives. It's hard to give this stuff up, and that's why change is hard, and that's why we often choose not to change.

So fortunately, and thank God for this, Lent is all about the call to fast so that our hearts can be made ready for God. Notice in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus talks about fasting and treasures right next to one another: Fast, he says, but don't showboat. Just do it and go about your day. And as for your stuff, your treasures: all this will pass away, so don't let your trinkets take up space in your heart that really belongs to God.

In our world, our stuff says a lot about us. Or so we think: the house, the car, the clothes, the gear, we are taught from birth that what we have says much about who we are.

But the fast reminds us this: what we give up says far more about us than that what we have. What we *don't* have, what we choose not to pursue, expresses our joy and our devotion to God infinitely more than the things that we covet, or acquire, or display for all to see. The meaning of our lives will be found not in the things that we have, but in the things we choose to go without.

Call the assembly, and sanctify the fast. God wants all of us to put down what we're doing, to gather as brothers and sisters in faith, and to make our hearts ready to return. When we do come together we'll likely forget what held our attention before, and begin to recognize the deepest desires of our hearts. We

have fallen away from God, and become so distracted by the world that we'd failed to notice.

But we notice now, and it's enough to break our hearts.

The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, Ash Wednesday, Year A, March 1, 2017, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina