

Ash Wednesday  
February 26, 2020

Pastor Lew Upchurch  
Joel 2:12-13

### “Surrender”

As I look out at you and you look back at me on this Ash Wednesday, let's just be honest about something. In this sanctuary tonight are people who struggle with believing God's promises. There are people here who love the security of money and possessions more than anything else. There are people who gossip every chance they get. People who have had affairs. People who are in the middle of breaking up their families because they aren't "happy." There are people who hide behind their phone screens at night watching porn or watching someone else's life unfold on social media and wishing it was theirs. There are people who pass by a neighbor in need. People who selfishly pass by their own spouses or children in need. People who have conveniently rewritten God's rules in favor of their own. And these people are you and me. Lord, have mercy. Lord, forgive us.

Because it's pretty obvious that we have allowed ourselves to be weak. It's pretty obvious that we have ignored the very Word of God that tells us what and what not to do when it comes to our relationship with him and with other people. The bottom line is that all of us have sinned. This reality sets the tone for this evening. And so does our God. For through the prophet Joel, He speaks and says "Even now, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning."

We hear His Word tonight, and somehow it all seems a little different. Perhaps it's the mark of ashes upon our bodies that make these words seem a little more serious, a little more real. Maybe tonight is the night we finally commit to honest reflection of our sin. Maybe tonight is that time we will self-examine our lives and actually tear our hearts wide open and lay all the evil we find inside at the feet of Jesus. Maybe. After all, Joel goes on to say that the Lord is gracious and merciful. He is slow to anger and abounds in steadfast love. That he relents—that is, he changes his mind—over disaster. That's my life and yours when it comes to sin—a disaster. So maybe tonight is the night we lay it all out, repent once again of all the wrong, and return to God.

But what about tomorrow? Will we be able to do it again? And what about all of the 40 days of Lent and beyond? Is God really calling us to turn away from sin, and return to him over and over? The answer is obvious, but still, we think to ourselves "we don't know if we can do that." Hopefully, though, we start by

welcoming him into the dark and hollow depths of our souls tonight. And yet, if we're honest, even now we're kind of guarded, aren't we? We don't really want him bringing us any real discomfort or disturbance in the way we run our lives. We don't really want to change our habits. We don't really want to admit that our ways will never be on the same level as his ways. Besides living in this world is hard. Temptations are relentless. If trying our best to turn from them while at the same time returning to God is what he really wants from us, then maybe maybe we can't deliver.

But that's just it. The reality is none of us can deliver what God wants—not only what he wants, but what he demands. Of course our vanity gives us the impression that we can. I mean, how many of us make little goals for ourselves—goals that we might have even started today that, whether we admit it or not, are designed to get God's attention? Maybe giving up beer or wine or pizza or desserts? Or taking up an exercise plan, or doing a few more nice things for people that we normally wouldn't do might make us little more attractive to God, we think. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but a healthier, slimmer, even nicer sinful you or me is still a sinner.

So what are we to do? The prophet Joel says to return to the Lord. He says to fast, and mourn, and cry. It sure sounds like we need to suffer a little bit in order to get God's attention. It sure sounds like we at least need to formulate some kind of plan of self-improvement, doesn't it? Actually we do, but it's not the way we think.

If you were at this service last year, perhaps you remember me telling you about a friend of mine who was caught up in a terrible sin that almost ruined his marriage and his family. If you weren't here or don't remember, I want to briefly share with you what he told me when I asked if I could mention his experience in a sermon. First he said that things were a lot better at home. And then he said he faith in Christ was the strongest it had ever been. Now considering what he had done, this shocked me. But he went on to say that God's Word had really penetrated his heart when he was caught up in his sin and it drove him to despair and then to repentance. He told me that he was literally on the road to hell before God's Word did this to him. But he never took credit for his repentance—it was all God's work, he told me.

Of course I knew that, but hearing it from someone who experienced it in such a real and raw way, was truly a gift. "People think they can come to God with repentance, but that's God's work," my friend said. "We then turn from our sin—that is we stop doing the thing.... I was only able to do that and repent, because I am saved through faith in Christ." Did you catch that? Because he is saved, he told me—not to get saved—but because he is saved, he was able to turn. It

was amazing to hear. But he wasn't finished. "If you're going to us any part of my story," he said, "please make sure your people hear this: "We're all so good at making God's love contingent upon the things that we do, but it's simply not true. We all have give that up. Through the Sprit's help, we all have to surrender."

And so, I share this with you tonight. Death is staring us all in the face. I mean take a look at the person beside you. The ashes on our foreheads is a reminder, not only of our sin, but that the wages of that sin is death itself. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust— and there's nothing we can do to stop it! No amount of money; no amount of power; no efforts on our part can do anything about it. So my friend was right because our confession of sin—our repentance—really starts with saying, "we surrender."

We surrender the logic that we so desperately cling to that turns the good news of Christianity into our plan of self-improvement. We surrender pretending to be anything other than the flawed human beings that we are. We surrender, and by doing so, we will find brutal honesty and relief.

"Return to me with all your heart," says the Lord. You can't do it on your own, but through my Spirit, I will allow my word to make you aware of your sin. I will allow you to be honest and say that you are a sinner and allow you to believe that it's true. And at the same time, you cant do it on your own, but through my Spirit, I will allow my word to speak to you my Gospel —that sure and certain promise that I have taken your sin upon myself, have paid the price for it all, and give you forgiveness, life, and salvation in my name.

Surrender, my friends. Feel the sorrow appropriate to your guilt. Tonight and throughout these days and weeks to come, surrender. But then through the faith Christ grants and delivers to you, receive his forgiveness won at a tremendous price. And be assured of his steadfast love, which endures forever. **Amen.**