



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

ASH WEDNESDAY

February 22, 2023

A homily by the Reverend James J. Popham

Last week, we observed Valentine's Day. Anywhere we looked in the grocery or pharmacy, we were confronted with hearts. Cards with hearts. Heart shaped cookies. Heart shaped boxes of chocolates. Candy hearts with cute messages. All romantic. All sentimental. All good in their own way. But reflecting a conception of heart in a very narrow sense: the heart as the locus of romantic love.

We also conceive of the heart in broader terms. Lighthearted. Soft hearted. Hard hearted. Broken hearted. Warm hearted. Cold hearted. Kindhearted. Heartless. We can even have a change of heart, both figuratively, and, thanks to medical science, literally.

And today the prophet Joel exhorts us, "Rend your hearts and not your clothing." Or in the more classical - and more memorable - formulation: "Rend your hearts and not your garments." Little is known about the author of this memorable directive. Biblical scholars cannot even agree on when Joel's prophecy was written. And questions exist about whether Joel in his prophecy was lamenting an actual invasion of locusts or speaking metaphorically about an invasion by foreign armies. So Joel is one of the twelve so-called minor prophets. In fact, Joel is so minor that if there were only ten minor prophets, Joel probably would not have made the cut.

But we can be sure that Joel, like his fellow prophets was speaking to a Hebrew people who had turned away from God and were confronting great calamity, whether armies or armies of locusts, which in their own swarming, consuming insect ways would have wreaked devastation comparable to that of any human army. And we can be reasonably certain that it would have been common practice in that culture to rend or tear one's clothing as a sign of anger, grief, or despair in the face of such a catastrophe.

But, wait, Joel says, "Don't rip your clothes." Forget this very visible demonstration of hopelessness. "Rend your hearts." Now Joel hardly meant to rip your heart out, at least, not literally. But he does urge and counsel an equally dramatic and demonstrative change of heart.

So what did Joel mean by heart? The notion of heart in the Hebrew tradition and language has a breadth and depth that far exceeds our common understandings of the term. The heart is the seat of who we are, our very identity. It encompasses not just feeling and emotion, not just thought and intellect. It is the locus, too, of will and purpose in our lives. Change of heart for Joel is not merely a change of feeling or a change of mind. It is a change of direction and orientation.

Rip open your hearts. Look deeply into your hearts. See the direction you have set for yourself. Then reorient your selves. Redirect your lives to God.

Joel's call is the call of the Lenten season that begins today. We are called especially now to step back, take a piercing and honest look into the depths of our hearts, and assess the direction and orientation of our lives. Now. Today. And throughout this next 40 days of Lent.

How might we do this? The very traditional Lenten observances include a setting aside of distractions and indulgences. Less television. No sweets. No social media. We all have our lists. Or the addition of a spiritual practice. Daily meditation or scripture reading.

If we are going to look deeply into our hearts, then we should clear our time and our minds for moments of honest reflection. And we should examine the direction of our lives, the deepest yearnings of our hearts in light of the direction and orientation of a truly Godly life. An open mind and open heart remind us at times that we often learn more from piercing questions than from pat answers.

Today, the ashes on our foreheads remind us that our time is finite. None of us can be sure how many tomorrows we have. Lent provides an opportunity now, today, to hear and live Joel's message. Far better to turn our hearts, our direction, our orientation, our very being to God than to wallow in the anguish, grief, and despair of a Godless existence.