

A Sermon for Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2026
For the Epistle. Joel 2:12-17 – The Gospel. Matthew 6:16-21
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The Prophet Joel

Ash Wednesday is one of the few observances for which the Book of Common Prayer provides an Old Testament lesson for the Epistle. The lesson from the prophet Joel warns of an impending “Day of the Lord,” which he describes as the invasion of a terrifying army:

The day of the LORD is coming . . . A day of darkness and gloominess, A day of clouds and thick darkness. A people come, great and strong . . . A fire devours before them, And behind them a flame burns; The land is like the Garden of Eden before them, And behind them a desolate wilderness; Surely nothing shall escape them (Joel 2:1-3).

As it is throughout the Bible, the Day of the LORD is a day of judgment on the people’s unfaithfulness. And, as it is throughout the Bible, the proclamation of judgment is connected with a call to repent. As God says through Joel:

Now, therefore, says the LORD, Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm (Joel 2:12-13).

If we read on in Joel, we discover something that is not common in the Bible. The people will repent. They will fast, turn from sin, and turn back toward God. And God will listen to their prayer. As Joel writes:

Then the LORD will be zealous for His land, And pity His people. The LORD will answer and say to His people, "Behold, I will send you grain and new wine and oil, And you will be satisfied by them . . . Fear not, O land; Be glad and rejoice, For the LORD has done marvelous things!" (Joel 2:18-21).

Matthew 6

A similar message is conveyed by our gospel from Matthew 6. Jesus warns against a hypocritical approach to fasting that is aimed at showing other people how pious we are. “They disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward” (Matt. 6:16). Jesus counsels us, instead, to direct our fast towards God:

When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly (Matt. 6:17-18).

The link between the fast proclaimed by Joel and the fast prescribed by Jesus is that both “work.” In Joel, God blesses the people who open their hearts rather than tearing their garments. Jesus promises that those who fast in secret and direct their fast toward God will be rewarded.

The fast of Joel was occasioned by an external threat. Jesus was commenting on the ordinary religious practice of fasting. Lent has a little of both. Most of us can identify a threat to our faith that needs the urgent call and opportunity of Lent. But Lent is also simply something the church tells us to do now. Lent is an urgent and ordinary season of opportunity.

An effective Lenten fast

Our lessons provide a warning and a promise for our Lenten fast. It is easy to turn Lent into a comparative and competitive religious exercise that amplifies the voice of the accuser, makes people feel guilty, and obtains no reward. Bad religious practice can create a greater sense of separation from God.

The true fast of the heart will focus on our disordered patterns of thinking and behavior that keep us from a closer relationship with God. We will practice saying no to things for a season, and we will practice saying yes to God by creating new spaces for silence, prayer, and Bible reading. Habits of Bible reading allow God's word to reform our disordered patterns of thinking.

The true fast will include practicing new acts of love towards the people God brings into our lives each day. The essential pattern of the true fast is that the no we say to things creates space for a new yes to God in prayer and to others through acts of love and good works.

The true fast will reveal our weakness and result in some failures—situations in which we won't do exactly what we planned. This is an important part of the lesson of the true fast. It is not about our perfect performance. It is about learning to depend on God more and learning to receive grace. If we allow our failures and weakness to cancel our fast, this reveals the hidden deadly sin of pride. When you stumble in some way, just get up and carry on with the fast the next day. Learn to receive grace and grow in humility.

A good Lenten fast results in the revelation of “a good confession.” A good confession is not merely a list of things we feel guilty about. Many people feel guilty about the wrong things. Even when we feel guilty about real and visible sins, our greater problem is typically hidden beneath them. It is our lack of faith and trust. We resist a full surrender to God's will and word. Instead, we try to control life and protect ourselves.

Lent is an opportunity to create an extended space of separation from our normal sources of comfort and medication. It is the opportunity to fill the void with new habits of silence, stillness, and prayer. It is an opportunity to ask God what he wants us to do, and then sit with God in prayer for a season as he reveals his answer to us. A good Lent will expose our controlling impulses and help us to grow in childlike trust and dependance.

Easter is forty six days away. The sign of the cross on our foreheads indicates that we are taking up the fast and beginning the pilgrimage to Easter through the cross. Our lessons teach us that If we will practice fasting from the heart and practice turning towards our heavenly Father in prayer, God will see us and reward us openly. On Easter we will say, in the words of Joel, “Be glad and rejoice, For the Lord has done marvelous things.”