

# **“The Call to Repentance”**

**2 Cor. 5:20b, Ash Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2015**

**Friends, I very seldom ask people to use their imaginations as part of their participation with me in one of my sermons, but tonight I'd like to ask you to do that very thing!** Let's suppose that before every one of us walks out of this church building tonight, **and the doors are locked—we had all agreed never to return to this church building again, or to even set foot on its property anywhere; until FIVE years from now, Ash Wednesday 2020, which is scheduled to take place on February 26<sup>th</sup>, the fourth Wednesday in February that year!**

If we did do this, what would our beautiful church look like after 5 years of no upkeep whatsoever, not on the grounds and not of the buildings? The grass would be waist high! The shrubberies would all be overgrown and uneven! The lights in our church sign out front would have burned out a long time ago. The mailbox out front would have become so full of letters and bills that the mail carrier would have stopped trying to fill it ages ago! **And because none of those bills had been paid, the electricity would be off and the entire structure would be in the dark. In short, there would be lots and lots of cleaning up and refurbishing to do!**

**Well, your willingness to imagine all of this with me** may give you some idea what the state of **Solomon's temple** was looking like in **Jerusalem** when the **Prophet Joel** was still a young man and centuries of misuse and disuse had caused **Solomon's once magnificent structure to look more like a building in the slums than in the upscale section of Jerusalem.**

But then there was a turnaround. In 2 Chronicles we read about how this dilapidated building was **cleaned up and refurbished. And after this remodeling took place,** the sacrifices were being offered down there at the temple in Jerusalem again and life at the temple returned to normal—well, almost!

**Joel spoke these words of our text because there was still a problem. The turnaround wasn't 100% complete. With respect to the temple, everything looked good on the outside, but there really had not been much of an internal change to take place within the hearts of God's people.** God wasn't only looking for an external makeover with respect to the temple! He was looking for an **internal makeover to take place within the hearts and minds of his people!**

**When the Prophet Joel speaks these words to the people of Israel, God wasn't so much looking for an outer change as he was looking for an inner transformation!**

**And let's further suppose that our own neglected building we talked about, hypothetically, a few minutes ago; that church that no one really took care of for the past 5 years, is you and is me.** If we were to take an honest look at our lives, what do you think we would see? More good or more bad? In this past year have we been more interested in the things of God or the things of this world? Can we honestly say that the LORD has always taken first place in our hearts, or has he too often, unfortunately, slipped through the

cracks of our lives as other priorities triumphed over God? You know those words of Isaiah that Jesus quoted one day: *“In vain do these people worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me!”* (Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:8)

Tonight is Ash Wednesday and it is a great day for each of us to do some housecleaning within our hearts. God has only one word of instruction for all of us in this regard, which is found 2 times of our OT lesson: **“Return!”** If you’ve been away from the Lord for a while, or if you haven’t followed him as vigorously as you know you should, God is holding out an invitation to you tonight: **“Return!” God commands us to return to him because he wants us back!**

As we dig deeper into our text, God tells us how he wants us to return to him. The Lord says to us, **“Rend your heart and not your garments!”**

**Back in Bible times, if you were truly sorry over something that you had done, you might tear your clothes apart and then dress in sackcloth and douse yourself with ashes; as a sign of your repentance and contrition.** But some people, no doubt, were guilty of playing a little game with God. When they were confronted with their sin by God’s priests and prophets, **they would tear their clothes and put ashes on their heads, but this was the full extent of it.**

There was no genuine repentance in their hearts. Their spirituality simply became a matter of an outward show and nothing else; just as it is possible, I still imagine in our day – for people to genuinely wear their Christianity on their sleeve.

**The problem is...if you’ll permit me to make a 21<sup>st</sup> century analogy—they were trying to cure cancer with a Band-Aid! If I got a lump of cancer here on my arm, perhaps I could always wear a long-sleeve shirt so I did not have to look at it, but the cancer would still be there!** The underlying problem would not be solved. God tells you and God tells me: **“Rend your heart and not your garments!”**

The Lord helps us to more fully understand his will when he says to each one of us, **“Return to me with all your heart!”** This is a **total commitment God** is seeking to receive from each of us!

**Illustration: When a husband and wife get married,** they commit their whole lives totally to each other. **Could you imagine at your wedding having your spouse promise to be faithful to you on every day of the week except Thursdays?** Thursday is just the one day when your mutual commitment is temporarily suspended!

**A partial faithfulness is really no faithfulness at all! When God invites you and me to return to him, he wants all of us committed to him!**

**But someone might say, “I don’t have a need to return to God. I’m not that bad!”**

Or another might say, **“I don’t have time to commit myself totally to God!”**

Well, brothers and sisters these excuses really don’t fly with God. He tells us of the universal need for all of us to repent. *“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the*

*breast. Even the priests!?! -- We would think that if anyone was OKAY with God, it would be the clergy, right? But not necessarily!*

But God was calling the whole people of Israel to participate in a national day of repentance! **And we can see that God was considering this more important anything else! He even tells young people, newly-weds on their honeymoon, to refrain from making love, until they both have both returned to the Lord!"**

Even on Ash Wednesday, as we stress the desperate need that we have for repentance, there is a silver lining in all this. We see it in the first two words of our text, "***Even now...***" There is time for you and me to come back to God, though St. Paul reminds us in our second lesson that it is a TIME-LIMITED OFFER that may soon expire!

*"We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God! Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"* Even now, with your rebellious past, somehow, the Lord still wants you. We talk about doing spiritual housecleaning tonight on Ash Wednesday, having genuine from-the-heart repentance.

**And God does something awesome when we come to him on his terms. The Sinner Repents, and the Lord Relents!** May I ask you to say those words with me? "The sinner repents and the Lord relents!" One more time: "The sinner repents and the Lord relents!"

Listen to verse 13, "***Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.***

**As we take our steps toward the cross of Jesus this Lent, we learn how God can afford to declare us innocent. He let us off the hook by placing Jesus on the cross. During these next 6 weeks, we will see how God transferred our guilt to his innocent Son Jesus. Here we learn why we love Jesus so much: because he gave every bit of himself to us.**

**We've heard them numerous times before,** but do we ever really tire of hearing them in our epistle lesson tonight? *"God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God! As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the race of God in vain. For he says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you!'"*

There is a humorous little story about a newly-retired pastor who was driving some distance to be a guest preacher at a church that he had never even been to before; and the driving time from his own home to this church was greater than he had calculated it to be. So he was speeding, **going faster than the speed limit allowed.** Well, the next thing you know he looks into his **rearview mirror and sees those penetrating blue lights flashing some distance behind him.** As the highway patrolman pulled him over and was making out the ticket, he looked up in to the officer's face and noted, **"Jesus said, blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7)!** Apparently this highway patrolman was well-versed in the Bible

too! For as was handing the ticket to that law-breaking pastor through the driver's window, he responded: ***"Jesus also said in John 8:11 'Go and sin no more!'"***

Brothers and sisters on this holy night of Ash Wednesday, we come here admitting that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but are also here gladly and willingly, reveling in the fact that: *"We are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus!"* (Romans 3:23-26)

In Psalm 103:10, we read: *"God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us for our iniquities,"* and yet we know that there are times when we sometimes suffer, or inadvertently bring suffering into other people's lives because of our unwise choices.

Back in early January I made a trip downtown to Palmetto Richland Hospital to visit one of our members who was seriously ill. When I arrived there I was detained from visiting that member because there were **medical attendants in that patient's room attending to his needs.** I sat down as usual, in the nearby waiting room and spotted a copy of that quarterly devotional that has been published in this country for many years now, entitled: **GUIDEPOST.**

**And in it, I read the true story of a 26 year old man named Andy who was raised in a Christian home, but who like many believers, from time to time, had unfortunately become a wandering sheep that had strayed away from the fold of God.** Looking back he remembered that day when he had not eaten a complete meal in two weeks. His rent was two weeks past due, and on top of this, his water and his electricity were about to be disconnected. In addition, he didn't have any money at that time to fill his prescription as one who had been diagnosed as being bipolar.

**Andy went to a friend of his who listened to his story with compassion; a friend who had actually been very instrumental in getting Andy to church years before this, when they both were in junior high school.** Now listening to Andy's problems, his friend begins to also wonder why God seems to have forgotten Andy whose whole life now seemed to be engulfed in one great enormous tide of personal struggle.

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While that young man Andy was angry with God initially for what he initially believed to be God's abandoning him, through his conversation with his friend, he was led to the realization that much of the trouble he found himself in was the direct result of some very poor choices he had made. He prayed to God those words of King David that we are going to sing a little bit later tonight found in Psalm 51, a prayer of confession David made

when he was confronted by the Prophet Nathan concerning his sin with Bathsheba. *"Create in me a*

*clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me*

*not away from your presence and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy  
free Spirit!"*

And I am grateful that the article in GUIDEPOST did not specify how he had foolishly used the money entrusted to him, so that more people could relate to him in his dilemma. He could have gambled his money away. He could have spent his money on alcohol or drugs. Or for that matter, he could have lost his money with his good intentions of starting his own business without the necessary experience, without adequate funding and research. He could have lost in the stock market, for that matter! Maybe it was due to his struggle with bipolar disorder. And certainly that would not have been his fault.

Still, there is a sense in which we sometimes do experience hardship in life as a result of our own disobedience of God's commandments, or of someone else's disobedience, whose life is closely aligned with ours! Later this evening we are going to sing those well-known words of Psalm 51 that King David prayed, acknowledging his need for forgiveness, which God showered upon him in great abundance, also providing David with the grace he needed to also live with and move forward with the unfortunate consequences of his sin.

Ash Wednesday gives us a chance to start over. As someone has said, **"Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, we can start from now and make a brand new ending."**

Ash Wednesday also offers us the opportunity to make a witness to one another in our own congregation and to others whom we may encounter when we leave this place. **Jesus Christ has come into the world in order to redeem it from the power of sin and death. Let us go forth, not only to prepare ourselves spiritually for a joyous celebration of Easter, but also to prepare the world to graciously receive his kingdom! Amen**