

“Return to the Lord Your God”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Joel 2:1-2. . . Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near — ²a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

"A day is coming -- the Day of the LORD," proclaimed Joel, "when God would be mocked no more, grieved no more, made to shake his head in shame or pound his fist in frustration no more. A day is coming when darkness will hover over the land and those who insist on sin and disobedience will die."

Those of you who know your Bible history know that Joel's "day of the LORD" did arrive. The southern kingdom and Jerusalem was overtaken by the Babylonians in 587 B.C and the Jerusalem temple was destroyed again by the Romans in A.D. 70.

Because our Father has judged his children throughout human history, we gather on Ash Wednesday to mark ourselves as those who deserve to have the darkness of judgment surround us. We gather to be honest about our rebellion and sin and the fact that we grieve God. We gather to mourn, in ashes and dust, the truth that because of our sin, we are a doomed, dying people in dire need of forgiveness and salvation. We gather on the next 5 Wednesday nights for Holden Village evening prayer and music and seminarian Mark's sermons that point us to Good Friday and a second chance through our faith in our crucified Christ.

Listen to Joel: ¹²Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

"Return to me," God says and "I will be gracious to you." When we, if in his position, would be tempted to cut the cord and save ourselves the future disappointment, God instead extends a welcoming hand and invites us into a restored relationship.

But on days like today, days when we feel the weight of our sin, nights when we confess our deserved destruction, God sees something he wants: a repentant heart.

A young man named John Critchfield had a repentant heart when he wrote this story of homeless days in Denver with Dave Krauss, a young son of Divinity who died last fall.

Hi Ms. Krauss, my name is John Critchfield and it's taken me a couple days of reflecting and calming to strike up the courage to send you a message. Dave was a dear friend. Him and I met in late 2015 and both happened to find ourselves homeless on the streets of Denver shortly thereafter. Neither of us belonged out there. Neither of us knew what was in store for us and how to survive out there. Kristen was in jail at the time and Dave was out there fending for himself just as I was. Him and I were so used to the real world, we couldn't ever figure out or understand that you cannot trust the homeless. We both have big hearts, Dave having the biggest, and we would lend, or loan our last couple of dollars, or food, or give clothes that we didn't necessarily have to give, just so others could be comfortable. They loved to take advantage of our generosity because

they knew if they didn't pay us back we weren't going to come find them with baseball bats. We couldn't watch others suffer.

We would rather be the ones suffering instead. Dave was very godly in this way. We were all in and out of jail in 2016. The pattern basically goes, arrest, jail, release, homeless, drugs, arrest, repeat. It's no life to live. I finally decided I needed a change in October of 2016, and went to a program after my release from jail. I finished the program, got an apartment in Washington Park, started working, and hadn't heard from Dave. Finally, I ran into him and Kristen at the light rail station one night. Dave had been doing well but had relapsed and couldn't go back to the guy's place where he had been staying. Kristen was in sober living, so of course I let Dave stay with me for a couple of days to clean up and detox. We confided in each other, he was very emotional because he missed his old life. He missed his boys. But most of all he hated being alone. It's the worst feeling in the world. Although he had Kristen, he didn't have himself and it frustrated him. With his family so far away, that was something I had here that he didn't, and it gave me a leg up.

I didn't realize it at the time what an advantage I had with my mom and dad being in Colorado, and educated about addiction and him and I got in an argument about it. "I was able to do this! You can too David!" He knew he could do it, there are just a lot of obstacles when you are homeless and withdrawing. You are sick and suffering and life doesn't seem so swell anymore. Everything seems exhausting, frustrating and impossible. He was heartbroken because he knew him and Kristen were toxic for each other in the midst of their addictions. But as a friend, me telling him that was not what he wanted to hear. At the time he wanted to be coddled and I wasn't being empathetic. I knew the truth was what I needed to sober up and thought it would do him

good. He stormed out and I never talked to him again. I am so sorry for your loss. Dave was really one of the good ones.

I am praying for you and the family and of course Dave. I wish I was able to attend the memorial in Ohio. I was just home in Michigan recently, I wish I held it off. I'm a guest speaker at the Narcotics Anonymous meeting this evening and I'm doing a tribute to Dave. To his kindness and generosity and of course that big bold smile. I wish I could thank Dave for being Dave. He was the one guy I couldn't keep an arms reach with on the streets. A ton of people I knew and was familiar with have passed away that are homeless. I am saddened by it and say a prayer. Dave's death means much more to me than this. Dave was a good man. He was honorable. He kept me going when I didn't think I could go anymore. He would give me a shoulder to cry on when I missed my daughter. I loved that guy. I wish I could have thanked David for being David.

We are marked with an ashen cross as a sign of our trust in God's ability to restore us, to forgive us, to save us, to continue walking with us through his Holy Spirit. It's a way of humbly proclaiming that though we deserved to be crushed on the Day of the Lord, we will have life through Christ on the cross, whom we trust as our forgiving Lord.

I know it makes no sense that God forgives us.

It makes no sense that God still loves us.

It makes no sense that God gifts us with grace and mercy.

It makes no sense that in baptism God calls us his child.

It makes no sense that God takes us back just because we cling to Christ.

Yet that's exactly what God does.

So what should we do? Today, let us repent from broken and open hearts. Let us grieve the ways in which we grieve God. Let us be honest about our sin as we come to God with ash on our foreheads, confessing our sins. And let us leave tonight knowing God welcomes us home. Let us leave tonight hearing from Joel God's constant refrain, "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

May the peace of God . . .

#328 – Restore in Us, O God