

## **Sacred Turning**

Ash Wednesday invites us into a sacred turning. Through the prophet Joel, God speaks with urgency and tenderness, “‘Even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to Me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning,’” (Joel 2:12). Not with part of our heart. Not with a polished version of ourselves. Not with a grand performance. But with our whole heart.

After being caught in adultery with Bathsheba, and called out for it by Nathan the prophet, David cried out, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions,” (Psalm 51:1). He doesn’t defend himself. He doesn’t try to spin the story. He throws himself on mercy.

And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them,” (Matt. 6:1). He speaks of giving, praying, and fasting – not as a public spectacle, but as secret devotion. “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full,” (verse 16).

Through Joel, God calls us to return to Him. Through the psalm, God teaches us how to return to Him. And Jesus shows us, in the Sermon on the Mount, what authentic return looks like. Tonight, we begin the work of imagination, a season of sacred turning. And sacred turning always begins with honesty.

## **Look At Me**

Jesus gives us clear instructions in Matthew 6. “When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others,” (verse 2). “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others,” (verse 5). “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do,” (verse 16). His warning is consistent – don’t do these things “to be seen by others.”

Friends, it’s possible to fast and never turn to God. It’s possible to pray, and never listen for an answer. It’s possible to give, and never love. Faith isn’t for show – God loves when our giving, praying, and fasting are honest and kind. Jesus doesn’t condemn generosity, prayer, or fasting. He’s purifying them. He’s rescuing them from being a performance.

He says, “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,” (verse 3). “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen,” (verse 6). “When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face.” (verse 17), Why? “Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you,” (verses 4, 6, 18).

True devotion is quiet justice, not loud performance. The hypocrites “disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting,” (verse 16). But Jesus calls us to something more – an integrity that doesn’t depend on applause. Think about a chameleon for a moment. It’s a master of blending in. It’s goal is to not be noticed. This allows it to focus on finding food, rather than on becoming food.

Fasting isn’t intended to make us stand out – it’s meant to help us focus on our relationship with Christ. The season of Lent can invite us to set aside something that keeps us from God. That’s what your post-its are for this evening. You have the opportunity to write down something that stands in the way of you and God having a deeper relationship, and leaving them up here when you come to receive the ashes. No one’s going to read what you write. I’ll take them and light them on fire and keep the ashes to mix with the palms for Ash Wednesday next year.

Alternatively, Lent can also invite us to take up something that draws us closer to God – and maybe that’s what you want to write on your Post-it, to leave behind. Jesus gives us a lot of good ideas in the Sermon on the Mount that we could work on throughout Lent. In a world that fixates on visibility, where so much of our lives are curated, displayed, and picture perfect, sometimes it’s difficult to discern motives. God invites us to practice care in ways that heal – not impress. That is what Jesus is after – care that feeds the hungry, prayer that steadies the anxious heart, fasting that reorders our desires. Sacred turning means shifting from “Look at me!” to “Lord, I’m looking at You!”

## **True Remorse**

Joel’s call is urgent and embodied, “Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and He relents from sending calamity,” (Joel 2:13b). But before that promise comes a command, “Rend your heart and not your garments,” (verse 13a). In the ancient world, tearing garments was a public sign of grief. But Joel says that’s not enough. Tear your heart.

Psalms 51 echoes the same truth. David says, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me,” (Psalm 51:3). There’s no blaming someone else. No minimizing it. We don’t hear David downplaying it. He speaks truth. He pleads with God, “Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin,” (verse 2). Later he states, “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart You, God, will not despise,” (verse 17). God’s not impressed by public spectacle. He’s moved by sincerity.

Lent begins with courage to tell the truth and live with mercy. It takes courage to admit, “I’ve sinned.” It takes courage to confess pride, resentment, distraction, self-righteousness. Joel calls for fasting, weeping, and mourning (Joel 2:12). Psalm 51 gives language to that mourning. But neither passage leaves us in despair.

Turning back to God means starting fresh with love, not carrying shame. Joel anchors the call to repentance in God’s character – gracious, compassionate, abounding in love. David prays not only for cleansing, but also for renewal, “Create in

me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me,” (Psalm 51:10). The goal of repentance isn’t embarrassment and humiliation. It’s restoration.

When we receive the ashes and hear, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” we’re not being sentenced to shame. I’m not going to read your Post-it – that’s between you and God; it’s a way for us to burn up what needs to change in our lives. As soon as this service is over, I’ll take them out under the car port to light them up – you can all come with me, if you want. But with the ashes, we’re being invited into humility. We’re dust, animated by God’s breath. Dust loved by a good and gracious God.

Sacred turning is a choice. I have an iPhone. There’s an app on it called Apple Maps. It’s a GPS. GPS is helpful in a lot of ways. But it can’t force anyone to follow its guidance. If you ignore, misunderstand, or cannot follow the directions given, the GPS just recalculates, right? The voice doesn’t condemn. It just redirects. Joel’s “return to Me” is God’s steady recalculation. But hearing the direction is not enough. We also have to follow it, just like we have to make the turns in our cars.

## **Listen to Me**

Joel says, “Return to the Lord your God,” (verse 13). Psalm 51 says, “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me,” (verse 12). Jesus tells us, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,” (Matt. 6:19-20). All three passages seek long-term peace. All three warn that what is detached from God is fragile.

Jesus explains why earthly treasures are unreliable. He says, “where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal,” (verse 19). But heavenly treasure is secure. How do we store up treasure in heaven?

We invest in what lasts – mercy, justice, faithfulness, love. Every time we forgive, something eternal is shaped. Each time we give without needing recognition, something lasting is built. Every time we pray in secret, our hearts become realigned with heaven. God invites us to practice care in ways that heal – not impress. That is heavenly treasure – care that restores human dignity, prayer that carries others before God, fasting that creates space for compassion.

Jesus then gives us something to ponder. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” (verse 21). Notice the order, church. Your heart follows your treasure. If we invest in status, our hearts cling to reputation. If we invest in comfort, our hearts resist sacrifice. If we invest in God’s kingdom, our hearts lean toward mercy.

David shows us in Psalm 51 what it means to redirect treasure. He doesn’t cling to his image, his reputation. He clings to mercy. “Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me,” (verse 11). God’s presence – the Holy Spirit – is David’s treasure. Sacred turning isn’t just us giving something up for Lent. It’s about reorienting what we value the most.

## Revelatory

We reveal ourselves constantly. Who we really are – our authentic selves – show up in what we talk about the most. We show who we are with what angers us quickly. What we find most exciting. These reveal our treasure.

Jesus makes it plain. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” (Matt. 6:21). Psalm 51 reveals David’s treasure. It wasn’t power. It wasn’t his reputation. It wasn’t being comfortable. It was a clean heart. “Create in me a pure heart, O God,” (Psalm 51:10).

Joel reveals God’s heart – gracious, compassionate, abounding in love (Joel 2:13). True devotion is quiet justice, not loud performance. It’s a life shaped by mercy rather than applause. It’s a heart broken open before God, rather than polished before others. And here’s where God’s grace comes in – treasure can be moved.

If your heart’s been tethered to what fades, you can begin investing in what lasts. If you’ve been practicing righteousness to be seen by others, you can begin seeking the Father, who is unseen. And when you turn, you do not drag shame behind you. Turning back to God means starting fresh with love – not carrying shame. Joel says God “relents from sending calamity,” (2:13). David experiences restoration of joy (Psalm 51:12). And Jesus promises that the Father sees and rewards what’s done in secret (Matt. 6:4).

At the beginning of Lent, we’re given space to examine how we live, how we pray, and how we follow God authentically. So tonight, hear again the invitation: “Return to Me with all your heart,” (Joel 2:12). “Create in me a pure heart, O God,” (Psalm 51:10). “Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,” (Matt. 6:20). “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” (verse 21). Sacred turning begins now, friends. And the God who calls you to return is gracious and compassionate, ready to cleanse, ready to restore, ready to renew.