
The Heart of Lent

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
Ash Wednesday – Year A**

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people... *gather all the people... don't leave anyone out.* Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even the infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. *Gather all the people... don't leave anyone out.*

The prophet Joel speaks to us about the heart of God and the hearts of us, the people lovingly created in the loving image of God.

He begins with a warning—saying the day of the Lord is near, and it could be a day of what he calls “thick” darkness. *Thick* because Joel envisions not just a dark sky of clouds, but clouds of locusts. So take whatever dark and stormy day you pictured when you first heard this scripture, and then kick it up a notch with swarms of flying bugs.

Joel is describing the devastation of a life separated from the love of God. He is describing the deep darkness of a hardened heart, an unfeeling heart, a heart with all the defenses up.

And yet, this is not what God desires for us. What God desires is intimacy, closeness, loving relationship: saying, return to me with all your heart. This is what God desires. Not our best work, our achievements, our gold stars, but our hearts. Our real, vulnerable, messy, sometimes broken hearts.

Why? Because “the Lord is full of compassion and mercy,” as we just sung in our Psalm. And where do we comprehend and experience compassion and mercy? In our hearts. We have to offer our hearts to God to know God’s compassion and mercy. It is the only way.

When I was seven years old, I walked down the aisle of my church and told the preacher I wanted to invite Jesus into my heart. That was the language we used in the church I grew up in. It was language that made sense to me. Of course I wanted Jesus in my heart, because God is love and our hearts are where love lives. But there was also this sense that until that moment, I had closed my heart off to Jesus, and now I was inviting him to come in and clean things up... or that I had finally cleaned up my own heart enough that now it was ok to let Jesus in.

My theology has changed a bit since then. Perhaps you think of God differently than when you were seven years old too.

I think what the prophet Joel invites us to in returning to God with our whole hearts, is to actually offer our hearts up to God. Not just invite God into our hearts, but hand our hearts over. To me, this feels more vulnerable. It feels like giving up a lot of control, and control is one of my favorite things to cling to. This feels less like a spring cleaning and more like a total renovation—and I don’t even get to see the plans before work begins.

What does it look like, this year, for you to turn to God with your whole heart. What does it mean for you to offer your heart to God in this season of Lent? What do you have to let go of—not give up, like giving up chocolate... but really let go of? What do you have to let go of to offer your heart to God in this season of Lent?

Will you let go of anger? Will you let go of the illusion of control? Will you let go of perfection? Will you let go

of convincing your friend that you are right? Will you let go of that grudge?

In a few moments, the Celebrant will invite us to observe a Holy Lent. He'll remind us that in the early church, Lent was a time when people who had been separated from the church were reconciled, forgiven, and restored to community. This isn't just a season of asking forgiveness, it's a season of granting forgiveness. Who do you need to forgive in order to give your whole heart to God?

You may know the answer to these questions already, or you may need to give it some thought. Lent is a time of self-examination. Not just today, on Ash Wednesday, but for a season. Because letting go and turning to God takes time. Not because we have to clean our hearts up and make them presentable to God, but because we have to do something much more courageous... we have to be willing to give God our whole hearts exactly as they already are. And in doing so, we invite God into the self-examination. We invite God's compassion and mercy to transform our hearts.

When we do this, it does more than just transform you or me as individuals. It transforms us. It transforms this community. So that all the people are gathered, and no one is left out. We offer our whole hearts to God, and God blesses us with more wholeness than we could ever attain or achieve or accomplish on our own.

God says: return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. Why? Because God loves you. And returning to that love requires a lot of letting go. Letting go can be hard and scary, yes. Self-examination can be hard and scary, yes. We return to God with our whole hearts, and God returns us to ourselves—our most whole selves. And no one is left out of the wholeness of God.

Amen.