

Ash Wednesday

WITH FASTING, WITH WEEPING, AND WITH MOURNING

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Ash Wednesday

Slightly Unusual Analysis by Marcus Felde

*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.*

*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.*

*14Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD, your God?*

15Blow the trumpet in Zion;

sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
16gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.
17Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'"

Preliminary statement: While this text does not provide much information that would fit into the categories Crossings customarily uses to show how the law of God works upon us, it could not be clearer about the state of emergency in which we find ourselves, living under the law of God. I thought it interesting that at one point the prophet calls upon the people to **fast**, to **weep**, and to **mourn**—injunctions which can be matched up with the three levels we call "external," "internal," and "eternal" in doing our diagnostics. I don't claim that Joel thought the way Crossings teaches. But I am using that coincidence to get at what I think Joel is trying to communicate—the fullness of the law's effect. This text is not a doctor in a lab coat saying we have internal, external, and eternal problems. This is a wild-eyed man with a sandwich board running, as it were, through Nineveh, telling us what must change, or else! I hope my analysis will help the user see what I see, that the threefoldness of our "matrix" is not synthetic

but reveals the depth of what the Law, and then (thank God!) the Gospel of Jesus Christ does in people.

DIAGNOSIS: Fast, Weep, Mourn!

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Fast!

Why does the prophet tell people to stop eating? Why ever stop eating? Because the most unavoidable and obvious sin may be *to eat a meal*. How in the world? Well, because to eat *when others do not*, to “*eat obliviously*,” is wrong. (See the Bible, especially 1 Cor 11:21.) We do not “live for ourselves,” do we? Well, eating is the most obvious and urgent way we take care of ourselves; but we do so *despite things that should be done first*, we do not love our neighbor as ourselves! See the story of the rich man and Lazarus, for example. He dined sumptuously while a poor and sick man languished within eyeshot. Therefore, the first thing the law does is knock our spoon from our lips: “Fast!”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Weep!

Why does the prophet tell people to stop being happy? Or should I ask why the prophet tells people to *start crying*? Because our capacity to “eat obliviously” to the hunger/needs of others means something is wrong inside us. If we do not “help and support our neighbor in all of life’s needs” (Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*, explanation of the meaning of the commandment “You shall not murder”), then, according to Martin Luther’s analysis, we do not “fear and love God” enough. We *fear* being hungry more than we fear God; we *love* eating more than we love God. Our heart ought to break, and, when it does, out will come tears: “Weep!”

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Mourn!

Why does the prophet tell people to mourn? I don’t know Hebrew,

but I trust the translators were not unaware of the connection between mourning and death. We cry when we get hurt, but we *mourn* when somebody *dies*. Well, the prophet is here doubling down on his command to weep. How many ways can he say it? "You are done for." "You will perish." "This is the end of life." "You do not have life." "You have lost life." "You are not going anywhere." "The life has gone out of you." "You have perished." "The axe is laid to the root of the tree." "*Their end is destruction; their god is the belly*" (Philippians 3:19). "The end." The law talks like that. And means it, even when it is not being explicit: "Mourn!"

PROGNOSIS: Rejoice, Laugh, Feast!

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Rejoice!

What the prophet merely projects as a possibility, that is what we announce and proclaim. The people have said, "Where is their God?" and we say "Right over here! In Christ crucified!" God *has* turned, relented, been gracious and merciful. God *has* sanctified the congregation. God *has* spared his people. God will not be mocked (see law), but neither will God let his people be mocked (see gospel). That blackness "spread upon the mountain" has been lifted by the one who is "the light of the world." "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again!" The "joy" in "rejoice," to distinguish it from the laughter in Step 5 (below), is the joy of the blind who suddenly see, the lame who suddenly walk, the perishing who suddenly rebound. The substance of it is what God has done for us in Christ Jesus, which becomes power-for-life as we proclaim it in the gospel. "Rejoice!"

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Laugh!

Laughing and crying are almost the same thing. (Check out phenomenologist Helmuth Plessner's *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior*.) They come as we walk a

dangerous path, expecting one thing but suddenly come upon something quite different, such as a punch line or a catastrophe. We weep when we have been having a great time (e.g., eating obliviously) and then our plate is pulled away. We laugh when, expecting to perish, a Samaritan comes our way and stops to help. We open our bleary eyes, and it is . . . God! "You're joking!" "No, you are mine." We fear and love the one who is giving himself for us: "Laugh!"

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Feast!

"Who knows whether [God] will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind, a grain offering and a drink offering . . .?" Who knows, Joel? We do. God *has* verifiably turned and relented. Not because of our rending of garments-and-heart, but because of his own mercy. In mercy, God sets a table before us and invites us to break bread with erstwhile enemies, and with the people his servants have invited in from the highways and the byways. Right in the presence of God, in public, God invites all of us: "Friends, move up higher." "Have another, please! I insist!" Christ the victim, Christ the priest, Christ the host, "given and shed" for the forgiveness of sin. Since the bridegroom is once again with us, how can we fast? "Give us this day, O Lord [and that's "us" in God's own and therefore widest sense], give us our daily bread." "Feast!"

(And then let brother James 2:15-16 have his say: "If a brother or sister . . . lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace . . . eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?"—*back to Step 1 with you! "Fast!"* And so on.)