

Ash Wednesday

BLOW THE TRUMPET!

A Call to Repentance in Good Times and Bad Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Ron Starenko

*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?'"*

DIAGNOSIS: Repentance Doesn't Start With Us. How Can It? We Have...

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Deaf Ears

Using the prophet's language, blowing the trumpet, sounding a warning, most often falls on deaf ears. Did the people of Joel's day, before the Babylonians armies invaded Israel from the north, hear or heed the prophet's warning of destruction and devastation? No! Did Europe prepare for the Nazi invasions by paying attention to the political rumblings? No! Even with seismic activity of below-earth movements or evidence of global warming from above, do we take action to avert possible catastrophes? No! Who of us even wants to hear of "days of darkness and gloom" (v. 2), caught up as we are in our distractions and denials? Who wants to change (read repent of)

anything about what we are doing or where we are heading, as persons, as a nation? Trumpet blowers, the prophets among us, we silence. We simply don't want to hear them, at our own peril.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Deluded Hearts*

Not wanting to hear, denying the darkness ever around us, we succumb to the darkness, which is an even greater danger. The people of Joel's day sought refuge in the self-delusion of "it-can't-happen-here," so also the people to whom the prophet Amos wrote, those who sought security in their "solemn assemblies...their burnt offerings...the noise of their songs...and the melody of their harps" (Amos 5:21-23). We, too, hide behind our myopic vision and our various brands of religiosity. Amos had it right, when he wrote that we are suffering a "famine of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11-12). Jesus came right to the point, saying, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matt. 15:8), then adding that such is what defiles a person, a people, a nation (15:18-20). To be sure, whenever these warning sounds are muffled, we slip deeper into chaos and darkness.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Dead Ends*

As a result, when the bad times descend upon us-earthquakes, tragedies, personal losses, all warning signs-we are helpless to read them right or learn from them. Skirting the issue, we often end up mocking God, asking "Where is God?" (v. 17), even joining in with others accusing God, making God the cause of our plight. As the apostle Paul put it, "God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow" (Gal. 6:7). No matter how many trumpets sound, blaring warnings, even if they come from God, we are bound to misread them, because, as Martin Luther put it, we "cannot by our own reason or strength come to God," also, we are unable to "fear, love, and trust in God above everything." And that tells the whole story of our predicament, how helplessly sinful we are. In fact, the prophet put the problem we have before God in

terms of cosmic disorder and death, “Truly the day of the Lord is great; terrible indeed—who can endure it” (Joel 2:11b). Who can escape?

PROGNOSIS: Repentance Starts with God. Who Else Can Save Us? Because...

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God Turns Toward Us*

The simple, powerful truth, however, over against our faithless assaults upon God and the “temporal and eternal punishment” we deserve, is that repentance first comes not from us, but from God. Repentance is God’s business, has been so from the beginning of time, the business of reversing the curse. The Scriptures use the strange metaphor of God repenting, God changing God’s mind. Some examples: God would “never again curse the ground because of human kind” (Gen. 8:21), after the Flood; and “I will change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring upon (wicked Nineveh)” (Jonah 3:10); and even in this Old Testament lesson, how God “relents (read repents) from punishing” (v.13). The “days of the Lord,” whether wrath or grace (vv. 2:2, 11, 29; 3:1, 18), ultimately point to reversing the judgment against us, where God takes on the human disaster, creating something altogether new in Jesus Christ, the “word made flesh” (John 1:14). The good news for all the world to see and hear and believe, is that God does by the universe-changing death and resurrection of Jesus, what is beyond our ability to create, saving us and all things from the brink of disaster. Though humanity, along with the whole creation, has become subject to “futility” (Rom. 2:20), to disorder, disease, even demise, God makes God’s self accountable, willing that “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay” (Rom. 2:21), as God’s “repentance” results in the redemption and resurrection of it all. By “repentance” God does the work of reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19), suffering away

our separation, making Christ the “day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). How good and gracious a trumpet call of God is that?!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Now We Get to Turn Our Faces toward God*

Paradoxically, then, God’s turning toward us becomes the power for us to turn toward God, to do our repenting, to own up to our rebellion against creation and the Creator, all of our attempts to cover up our sin by our piety and our religious rituals (Matt. 6:1-6). The prophet Joel wrote, speaking for God, “return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; (rending) your hearts and not your clothing” (vv. 12-13). This is more than apologizing for our mistakes, as we do in polite society, or the national gestures we offer for the crimes against the Native Americans or the Afro-Americans. This also is not an exercise in self-abnegation; it is rather a positive, transforming action, born of the Holy Spirit, how “God’s kindness” (Rom. 2:4) leads to our repentance. And so, the God’s “repentance” is not complete until we are brought back into fellowship with God and into harmony with the whole creation.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Then, Turning toward Our Neighbor*

Furthermore, if God turns God’s face toward us, Jesus being the human face of God, then our repentance is also not complete until we turn our face toward our neighbor. If God has reversed the curse in Jesus’ death and resurrection, giving the creature and the creation a new destiny (2 Cor. 5:12), then our repentance becomes a way of life, a living out of what has already begun, call it salvation, redemption, reconciliation, doing the “new thing” (Is. 43:19), having the “right spirit” (Ps. 51:10) that God works in us. This means the end of “blowing our own horn,” (Matt. 6:2), masquerading behind our piety. It means getting on with “bearing fruit worthy of repentance”

(Matt. 3:8), opening our ears to the cries of the suffering, turning our faces toward the outcasts of society, the hungry, the poor, the disenfranchised. It means even, when necessary, to “blow the whistle” on the actions of wasteful citizens, greedy corporations, and imperialist countries, who roll over human beings and our natural environment, like plundering armies. The trumpet call of God to us all is to get on with God, to return to the One who “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing” (v. 13), to be the people of God, in good times and bad. And, then, we will have come full circle!