

Christ's Testimony

AW-19, Mar. 6, 2019
Mt 6:1-6, 16-21, Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

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This night begins the 40 day journey of Lent.
Just as Israel wandered in the wilderness 40 years, learning to trust the Lord,
and just as Jesus wandered in the wilderness 40 days,
resisting temptation and trusting the Lord,
so we now enter the 40 days of Lent, learning again to trust the Lord.
This is a time for remembering the Lord's goodness for this congregation.
It is a time to recall how the Lord has been guiding and using us
these many years for the sake of Minneapolis, and truly, the world.

People are hurting.

People are divided.

People are worried, angry, confused about the state of the world.

This Lent we will recall that *God is With Us*,
that God is more than a mascot cheering us on,
that God is presence and power and person
bearing us and healing us and redeeming this world.

This Lent, *God is With Us* in our physical, spiritual, relational, mental and communal lives.

God is With Us in every challenge and celebration.

God is With Us and with our neighbor

and even with the one who does not recognize our God of grace.

The world's worries are evident.

Our calling as church and as followers of Christ

is to be a source of hope, a source of healing, a source of grace.

The readings this Ash Wednesday night call us to examine our piety.

Piety is the practice of our faith.

Piety is *revealing God's Holy Spirit in our midst*

through acts of God such as caring, protecting, nurturing, blessing, redeeming.

What impresses God are not *signs* of piety,

but actual deeds that improve another's life and well-being.

What impresses God is change of heart

that forgives and reconciles with the one with who made us mad.

What impresses God is acts of justice that buck the system and make things right for the vulnerable.

What impresses God is behaving in such a way

that reveals the spirit behind the name "Christian."

Jesus taught,

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them..."

He did not say never demonstrate your faith publicly.

Jesus criticizes those who put on pious display just to impress,

criticizes those who claim to be Christian and yet behave so mean-spirited.

To win the world to God

we don't draw attention to *ourselves*.

To win the world to God we point attention to Jesus.

Our piety is to spotlight *Jesus*.

Our piety, our righteous attitude, our honorable behavior

is to reveal Jesus within us,

Jesus who has forgiven us,

Jesus who is now our standard and guide.

Our words, our deeds, our very being

is to be one great billboard announcing the present reign of God.

There is much hurting in our world.

It is easy to see the disasters, the violence, the anger and division.

The prophet Joel spoke to a nation experiencing a devastating environmental disaster.

The prophet attributes the environmental disaster to human causes.

Wave after wave of locusts destroyed all the agriculture of the land,
sending the entire population into starvation and turmoil.

What the cutting locusts left, the swarming locusts ate.

What the swarming locusts left, the hopping locusts ate.

What the hopping locusts left, the destroying locusts ate.¹

Sometimes terrible misfortune comes out of proportion to our choices.

Sometimes terrible misfortune comes out of no cause of our own.

Sometimes terrible misfortune comes simply because of our neglect and indifference.

America is experiencing deep divisions,

distrust and suspicion are the reigning positions,

churches, once the cornerstones of community, are being emptied,

“spiritual” is replacing godly and Christian.

This is no coincidence.

The very first commandment of God given to Moses,

the primary commandment at the heart of all other commands,

is “I am the Lord your God.”

We don’t get to choose our gods.

We don’t get to decide what we want to believe.

We don’t get to determine what we want to be right and wrong.

Church is reminder that there is a higher power than ourselves.

Church is a reminder that we are accountable to another.

Church is reminder that there is a certain way of life that
gives satisfaction, meaning, happiness.

Church is a reminder that the God we do not get to choose

is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

These coming weeks of Lent,

we return to the Lord our God for healing of self and of this world.

We will plead and pray for the Holy Spirit

to rend our hearts and mold them in grace,

to intercede in the brokenness of self and brokenness of others,

for the Holy Spirit to reveal God here, now.

As the prophet writes,

“Who knows whether God will not turn and repent and leave a blessing behind?

Who knows whether God will choose this church

to be anchor and center and source of blessing to this neighborhood?

Who knows whether God will...?

¹ Joel 1:4