**Joel 2:12-19 February 17, 2021 (Ash Wednesday)**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Hear again these words from Joel chapter 2, “Yet even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning…..Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly.” Tonight, is such an occasion. We are gathered here not to celebrate, not to sing joyous and happy songs, not to dance, not to join in fellowship and friendship and fun. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the penitential season, where flowers are put away, and even specific words of celebration and joy that we would usually hear in our worship services will not be uttered for 40 days. This is not a usual gathering. This is not a fun affair. Tonight, this is a place of dust, of ash, and a reminder of death. This is a place where sin is in the spotlight, where sinners come not to be lied to or puffed up with some false sense of pride and acceptance of your wrongdoing, but rather to be faced with the truth. To be handed clothes of repentance rather than comfort, to be covered in ash rather than sweet perfume. This is a day of mourning and reflection. The season of Lent has begun.

As we gather in this solemn assembly tonight, I ask you, When do people gather together? When do you see your loved ones? I don’t mean your brothers and sisters or your children, whom you would see on birthdays or holidays, I mean your extended family. Your second cousin, your great uncle, your third nephew, the ones you know are in your family but you aren’t 100% sure how they are related to you. Family reunions are probably the most popular places. The most regular. You may have a big family reunion for all the members of your family every few years. A wedding in the family usually brings everyone out, and it’s a joyous and happy assembly of family and friends. You eat, drink, and dance the night away. There’s cake, there’s music, there’s fun and memories of other weddings that you’ve attended, even the memories of your own joyous and happy assembly when you said, “I do”. These are happy assemblies, but there is another assembly that brings the family together, and one that fits what we are talking about here in Joel chapter 2. It’s the other time the family all gathers together. A funeral. A solemn assembly. There isn’t dancing…..and it isn’t fun. No, this assembly is a chance for a family to come together to comfort each other. There is fasting in a sense that usually around those days things are hectic and you may not have a regular schedule, you’re meeting with different people and making arrangements. Time is sketchy, routines are disrupted. You may go the entire day without eating anything at all. There is weeping, and sadness, as memories are revisited, and the realization sets in that you won’t be able to see your loved one again as you had in the past. They are gone. Which leads to the funeral service, the final place of mourning for the assembled family and friends. A time of mourning together, as you then go off to mourn in the days, weeks, months, and years to come. No one wants to call such a solemn assembly, but it is necessary. This is for the good of the family gathered, for the friends in the community, and for the church family to remember this individual and the life they now have in Christ. It is a time of sadness, a place of mourning, that down the road leads to joy in the realization of the life that they still have, even if it’s not with us here on Earth anymore.

There is a Pixar film that came out a few years ago called “Inside Out”. I practically have the film memorized even though I’ve only seen it once with my eyes, but I’ve heard it in the car probably more than a dozen times as my children would watch it on long car trips. The story centers around the emotions of a girl named Riley as she and her family are moving. Joy, Sadness, Anger, Disgust, and Fear are her emotions and they all take turns controlling her. Usually Joy has control, but after the move everything gets out of wack when Sadness seems to be doing things she usually didn’t do. The movie tells a message of how you can’t always just be a superficial happy, there are times when you have to stop and feel the sadness that is built up inside of you, there are times when you have to face the sadness of events that effect you and that you have no control over, which is why one of the final scenes in the movie is when Sadness and Joy make their way back to the controls and Sadness allows Riley to open up and express her sadness over moving.

The season of Lent is a season of reflection on sin, which can’t possibly bring happiness. We can’t artificially just ignore the things that we do wrong and stay happy about our rebellion and disrespect to God and His Word. This is a season of sadness over sin, because sin has brought death to our world. Now we live in a world where people die. And it makes us sad. We too will die. We can’t avoid it, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” We are guilty of sin, and therefore we will die. This isn’t a happy thought, and we can’t pretend it is. Instead for this season we have to focus on the reality of sin, and how our Savior Jesus Christ saved us from this fate of eternal death. We can throw a pity party for our plight in this world and feel sorry for ourselves, and that we sin, and that we live in a world of sin, but that’s not the point of Lent. Instead, our sorrow over sin must extend beyond just what we experience and look instead to what Christ experienced for us.

It’s why I love the words of our sermon hymn for tonight even if it isn’t a “Lent” hymn, because it doesn’t sugar coat things even if the music is melodic and beautiful. It is hard to sing if you’re paying attention to just the words, but it’s the truth about what happened to the very Lamb of God, the pure, perfect, sinless, holy Son of God. “Your Gift of love, they crucified, they laughed and scorned Him as He died, the humble King they named a fraud, and sacrificed the Lamb of God.” It’s your fault that happened. It’s my fault. It’s everyone’s fault for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The payment of sin is death, someone had to die. We messed up and someone had to pay the price. And Jesus did. In our Midweek Lent series, we are going to see the witnesses of what this verse is talking about. We are going to talk about those who were there, and how they were changed, from the Centurion, to the Thief on the Cross. We aren’t going to ignore this painful memory in our lives as Christians as our Savior hung and bled and died, because he did it for you. He dies for you. He suffers and dies, to save you. Which brings a mixture of joy and sadness in this season.

It is a solemn truth. Which is why we have a solemn assembly. He died for me. We don’t want him to die, but if he doesn’t die, we will. So we are sad that he suffers and dies, but we are glad that he loves us so much to save us. Funerals are solemn assemblies, tears are shed, but that doesn’t mean people aren’t laughing, and remembering, and finding joy in the memories they have of the loved one who has passed away. Solemn assemblies are important, but they are not assemblies of despair. There is hope, and joy, in any assembly of God’s people because we have the hope and joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which names us as God’s beloved children. We are forgiven. We are loved. We are saved. What kind of God do we praise? Do we believe in? Do we follow and adore? Joel paints us the most beautiful picture, “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

So you’ve messed up, you’ve sinned, you’ve done things wrong and recognize that. You’ve come here to repent of those sins to God your Father, and his response? Love. Forgiveness. He is gracious and merciful to you, yes, even you, the one who knows of the depths of your sinfulness. He knows the real you, and loves you anyway, and forgives you completely. May that bring you comfort throughout these 40 days, in the solemn assemblies, in the joyous ones you may experience outside this house. As you journey in personal devotion and public worship to the cross. To the place where they sacrificed the Lamb of God. For you.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.