

## Ashes! Ashes! All Fall Down

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Two stories: (1) We were in a restaurant, seated near a family with two little girls—one about six or seven and the other around three or four. The youngest was full of energy and her voice and her delightful laughter were a bit loud.

I'm not sure what Momma didn't like, maybe the volume, but several times I noticed her pulling the little girl—firmly—and whispering in her ear. And Momma wasn't smiling! Have you ever noticed—in a restaurant, or in church—how parents correcting a child often is more distracting than the child's behavior?

Well, anyway, this went on for some time. Momma's facial expressions and body language conveyed an increasing level of disapproval; but the little girl seemed to be having a ball. I'm guessing she thought that, being in a public place, she was immune to discipline. You know, it's the parent's job to set limits; it's the kids' job to test those limits. And this sweet little girl was testing her limits.

Suddenly (again, creating more disturbance than the child), Momma jumped up, pulled the little girl out of her highchair and started for the door. Now this had been going on for a while; but at that moment, the little girl had a look of total surprise and shock on her face; and wailed all the way out the door. Hold on to that picture: that look of shocked disbelief on the little girl's face.

Second story: I was driving home from Little Rock on I-40. Around the Morgan-Maumelle exit, Bubba passed me. His pickup was lifted and loud. I was driving 75 mph, and blew my doors off: 90-95 mph, weaving in and out of traffic. Near the Mayflower exit, I saw the blue lights flashing up ahead, and then I passed Bubba—him and his new friend with the flashing blue lights on top of his car.

Turns out, I know Bubba; not well, but, we're acquainted. Later that evening, Bubba was on Facebook, ranting and raving about getting a ticket!

Speed limits are posted. I assume he has a driver's license, which means he passed a test demonstrating knowledge of traffic laws and rules of the road, sufficient to be considered safe. And he not only was disregarding those laws, he was flaunting his disregard for all to see. And then, he was enraged that he got a ticket. Now, hold on to those two pictures.

Ash Wednesday is this week. Throughout the history of Judeo/Christian faith, the symbolism of ashes was a forceful reminder of human sin and mortality. Ashes are the residue of something burned out and wasted, that which once was but is no more: "Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes."

Today's Scripture is the Old Testament Lectionary reading for Ash Wednesday. We know almost nothing about the historical setting of the prophet, Joel, so it's impossible to know the crisis Joel addresses in today's scripture. But it's clear that the text is an alarm bell in the darkness of the night.

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 (NRSV)

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—  
<sup>2</sup> a 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.

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Yet even now, says the LORD,  
    return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
<sup>13</sup> rend 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.  
<sup>14</sup> Who 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?  
<sup>15</sup> Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;  
<sup>16</sup> gather 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.  
<sup>17</sup> Between 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?'"

A few years ago, pastor and author Dan Kimball distributed 3 x 5 index cards to several hundred 20-somethings and asked them to write their most pressing questions about the Christian faith. The questions they gave shocked him. Not one asked about the Resurrection or the virgin birth or philosophical proofs of God's existence, or biblical inerrancy. Instead, they asked questions like, "Isn't the

Bible sexist?" "Does the Bible condone slavery?" "How could God command genocide in Scripture?" "Is the New Testament antisemitic?"

There always have been hard questions about the Bible; but these questions represent a shift from the questions of a generation ago. In the past, difficult questions tended to focus on whether Christianity is true. The questions were about proof. This generation essentially assumes the truth of the faith. Instead, they question whether Christianity is good. Their questions are about integrity.

Joel's words are difficult. There even are hints in parts of this reading that it is God who is attacking. On the other hand, other parts of the reading suggest a great and powerful people who are the threat.

Now, here's the tricky part: what matters for our reading is that the hostility of God and the reality of human threat are mentioned in the same breath—as if they are identical. This is not mere human politics, nor is it supernatural "scare theology." It is a genuinely human and immediate threat, yet, rooted in and authorized by the will of God. Would God really do that? Would God cause a catastrophic "day of darkness and gloom?"

John Dominic Crossan wrote, "My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally."<sup>1</sup>

There are over 5,600 Greek manuscripts containing all or part of the New Testament, most dating to the Middle Ages. The oldest complete copy of the New Testament dates to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. No two manuscripts are identical. Apparently, ancient scribes were no better spellers than we, because most of the errors in these earliest manuscripts are spelling errors. But there are numerous times when words are reversed, or put in different order; in some cases words are simply omitted—words, sentences, paragraphs, and even pages simply left out due to scribal fatigue, inattention, or ineptness.

And yet, there are specific themes and ideas that are consistent throughout the accepted biblical canon. One of those themes is that God is a God of Covenant.

We just finished three sermons on Micah 6:8: the question of the proper worship and service of God. Micah is clear: "God has showed you what is good..." The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of Joseph and Moses and David, the God of Jesus is a God of Covenant—a God who is clear about mutual expectations: "I am the Lord, your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt... I will be your God, and you will be my people... I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you, and all nations of the earth will be blessed by you..."

"I will/you will; I will/you will... I have showed you what is good. Any

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness", also can be translated, "All inspired scripture is also useful..." When Paul wrote these words to Timothy, the only scriptures available were the Hebrew Scriptures.

questions?"

And the consequences also are clear. In Jeremiah: "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. (Jeremiah 7:3 NRSV) But there's a flip side: (v. 8) "Go to Shiloh... where I made my name dwell at first, and see what happens when my people disregard my covenant and try to do it their way. Yet, God had showed them what is good.

Now, look what's happening here: "I will/you will; and if you will/I will; but if you won't, then the covenant is broken, and you're left to your own devices and the consequences thereof.

A marriage covenant is not honored. There is infidelity. And though only one partner was unfaithful, the relationship is broken. And there are natural, predictable consequences in any broken relationship.

If you get caught driving 90 mph in a 70 mph zone, you already know the consequences: you took the test. There's no justification for surprise or anger. You know what is right.

If you act up in a restaurant and Momma tells you four times to be nice, and you just laugh and continue doing whatever it was you were doing, you already know the consequences! There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And there's no justification for surprise or upset. You know what is right.

Here's the answer to those hard questions: God's not going anywhere. There are natural and predictable consequences to the breaking of any covenant: the marriage covenant, the covenant of law, the covenant of parenting. There are consequences—natural and predictable. But, scriptures leave little doubt: our God is the God of second, and third... and three hundredth chances. Joel concludes:

Yet even now, says the LORD,  
return to me with all your heart,

\* (the theme of Lent)

with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

\* (...that's where the ashes come in: mourning...)

<sup>13</sup> rend 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.

Thanks be to God!