

Primary Texts: Joel 2.1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

“Blow the trumpet in Zion” shouts Joel, “the day of the Lord is coming, it is near...” But “Beware” Jesus says “of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...” “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do...”

Conflicting messages, at first glance. We ask like the 5<sup>th</sup> grade band student, “Should I play the trumpet, or not?” ...Perhaps we’ve missed the message. Perhaps we’ve missed the music behind the notes.

In the book, “A Trumpet in Darkness – Preaching to Mourners” the author tells the story of another trumpet:

The twelve-year-old boy felt lost. The opening campfire was over, and he was back at the cabin with seven strangers. Soon everyone was in the sack. Lights were out...The chirping of crickets was a sinister sound. The adolescent had never felt so alone in his life... Then he heard it. The sound of a trumpet sent shivers up and down his spine. The words of “Taps” echoed through his brain. “Day is done. Gone the sun, from the lake, from the hills, from the sky. All is well, safely rest. God is nigh.” ...a trumpet in darkness was a note of hope.

Trumpets sometimes play fanfares for the beginning of great, epic journeys. Sometimes they begin more humbly, as the ancient saying tells us, “The journey of 10,000 miles begins with a single step.” And it is in this way, without the fanfare of trumpets, but instead with the humility of ashes and the simplicity of bread and wine that we begin our Lenten journey. We can only guess that the journey through the next forty days of Lents will be marked both by hills and valleys, by rough terrain and awe-inspiring views.

But what is our destination? If we begin our journey today, on this Ash Wednesday with a single step of ashes and a meal... in what direction do we set our face? To the west with its retiring sun? To the youthful east? To the north where melting polar caps await us? To the southern

hemisphere where most of the, so-called “third-world” countries are located, but where they will soon (if not already) have “two-thirds” of Christians? Where might our Lenten journey take us? Perhaps in all of these directions, as we go deeper into our own hearts?

If your upbringing in the church was anything like mine, then you might expect that the only possible direction our Lenten journey could take us – is DOWN. Down into the depths, in order to “repent of our sins,” which usually translates: feel bad about yourself, give something up that you really enjoy... or take on something that you really dislike. And if nothing else, Lent means enduring not just one sermon per week that puts you to sleep, but two! (this is intended to be a joke).

But let us be clear from the beginning of our journey: that the intent of Lent – not to mention the goal of being Christian – is not to feel bad about yourself, it’s not *always* to give up something that you enjoy or to take on something that you dislike, and I certainly hope it isn’t about building a tolerance for sermons that induce narcolepsy.

Then we ask again, what is this journey of Lent about? Is it possible that the answer lies in trumpets? “Blow the trumpet! ...sound the alarm...” “Wake UP!?!” Joel seems to say. Something new is happening, and at first glance it doesn’t seem good. “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.”

The vivid description of this army was translated as a comma in our first lesson this evening – where verses 3-11 were left out... but let it suffice to say that the trumpet for Joel announces an army that conjures up the modern day genocides in Rwanda, warfare in Darfur, atrocities in concentration camps, Lakota tales of General Harney and General Custer.

But perhaps these verses were left out of our reading for this evening, because this it is not our final destination in Lent. We might have revealed to us atrocities like Rwanda and Darfur, or worse yet, we might become aware that many of the privileges we take for granted today are built on the backs of generations of native peoples. This might be part of the journey, but guilt, misery, warfare, depression, and destruction – these are not our final destination.

In the early Christian church, *nearly all* baptisms were done during the Easter Vigil Service (just over forty days from tonight) and **LENT** was a forty-day *period of preparation* for those being baptized. But by the fourth century, this forty-day period became a time for ALL Christians to prepare for Easter. In fact, we get our word “quarantine” (which literally just means “forty”) from the forty days of lent. In Lent, we are a people who intentionally “quarantine” ourselves.

For these forty days we stand away from the normalness of life. We try to seek a quiet shelter – *not* to feel guilty or to give up that which provides life, but to set aside a shelter to heal... to be reminded of *what it is that gives life*... we *set our faces towards an Easter*.

And so, our destination begins to take shape, like the melody line begins to emerge from a jazz trumpeter. We lean towards the message of Easter – the message of LIFE – life where we least expect it, in the tomb of one who died a most awful death.... But we’re getting ahead of ourselves on this journey. Our feet stumble when we look too far ahead, we forget the gift of today when we focus our gaze too far ahead on the path. And so part of our Lenten practice might be to content ourselves with each step, knowing that our destination may be different than we expect.

And for now, on this Ash Wednesday, we must be content to be reminded of LIFE through a different symbol. A symbol that is, perhaps, less exciting than an empty Easter tomb... Tonight we consider our journey towards life through a symbol that asks us to consider its opposite: *death*. **ASHES** smeared on our foreheads, and words spoken that would *seem* to offer little comfort: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

*But this is* a simple truth of life and perhaps there is an odd comfort in that – we *are* earth creatures... And whether we like to or not, we must eventually come to terms that these lungs of ours which breathe in and out a certain breath of life – minute after minute, hour by hour, day after day, year added on year...eventually these lungs will return to dust and ashes along side of the rest of our being. Ashes remind us this night, of our *total* dependence for life on a God who we sometimes call “Spirit” or “Breath of life.”

But ashes point us in another direction on our journey as well. Again, from the history books – before soap came in to use, ashes were often used as a *cleansing substance*. And those who study forest fires tell us that mysteriously from ashes come new life and renewal... But we ask as a people “quarantined” in Lent: cleansing and renewal from what? What is it that threatens our lives?

Or, to reframe the question: What is it that prevents us from being aware of God’s love? What prevents us from trusting the words of the prophet Joel – the ones that follow the vivid description of the death and destruction that we bring upon ourselves and others – the part where Joel says, “Yet even now, says the Living God, return to me with all your heart... Return to your God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”? What holds us back from committing every ash of our being to love?

Jesus says, “beware of blowing trumpets that announce when something holy is coming.” Not because God brings destruction or war or armies like the one in Joel or suffering or guilt or depression or envy or anger or husbands beating wives or global warming or unemployment or cancer or jealousy or poverty or ignorance or bullying or not loving our selves enough to become attuned to the things that give us life and the things that take life from us. God doesn’t bring these things, we do.

But God works us through them. Teaches us about life from ashes. Teaches us about abundance from wilderness wandering. Teaches us about unity from diversity.

As one author described it, “God’s abounding mercy is our oxygen. And Lent is a reminder not to forget the oxygen. Not now, not later.” So, as we take our first step on this Lenten journey – this journey of what might seem like 10,000 miles... Let us begin listening more closely for God the trumpet player in the darkness. Let us ask what prevents us from committing every ash of our being to love. Let us turn the gaze of our journey towards the source of LIFE. If we *do* anything, let us take heart and be reminded that “God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Amen.