



## Ash Wednesday

### Sound the Alarm

[RCL] Joel 2:1-2,12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103 or 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

*“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain.”*

There are moments for all of us when our lives change forever: When someone is born or when someone dies, or when *you* get injured or have a health episode that threatens your life. These are moments when our own humanness and mortality are shoved into our faces. When the preciousness and the fragility of human life are undeniable. And I can’t help but notice how often those moments involve hospitals.

And then there are the people who work with people whose lives are changing like *that*: EMTs, ER doctors and nurses, and other healthcare workers confront death each day. This has been all the truer during the last two years.

Healthcare workers watch people their own age die suddenly of accidents and cancer and are forced to confront their own mortality. They understand, perhaps better than the rest of us, the truth of Ash Wednesday: that we are dust, and that life is so, so fragile.

The prophet Joel calls to the people in our Old Testament reading to “Blow the trumpet in Zion, [to] sound the alarm on [God’s] holy mountain.” Kings did this from time to time in ancient days; they would call for a fast, a time for the whole community to rend their clothing, put ash on their heads, and repent of their sinful ways. But here in Joel, it’s God, not a human leader, who calls for the fast. The whole thing is meant to be a wake-up call: you can’t continue as you have been. You can’t go on like this.

Wake up. Pay attention. Things *must* change.

In today’s world, it may seem a little bleak to spend a day talking about death and even more so, sin. Sin is not a popular modern concept.

Too often, “sin” is reduced to the times that Jesus was looking over our shoulders and heard us say a bad word. If all we’re talking about is relatively trivial offenses (or non-offenses that people *think* are offenses) committed by individuals, we are not getting at exactly what “sin” is. Though nearly all of us have a

psychological need to be forgiven when we've done wrong, we miss the picture when we only think of sin as individual and not communal.

Things in the world are not as they should be. And it is on each one of us and all of us together.

We live in a world where people frequently must flee violence and domination, where some people don't have clean water or food, and where still others — some within our own nation — must live in fear. We live in a world where greed is rampant, and we are distracted, and we only have to acknowledge truth if it confirms our pre-conceived feelings and beliefs. We have all contributed to the way that things are. We need to wake up. We need to change.

*Blow the trumpet in Zion. Sound the alarm on God's holy mountain.*

It begins by paying attention. We are not here forever. Life is so, so fragile. We all — collectively and individually — may be a lot closer to disaster than we think we are. We'd better watch what we're doing, live intentionally, and enjoy the time that we have.

On Ash Wednesday, we are called to pay attention and to remember that we are dust. We are not here forever. We need to repent and be more mindful of the ways that we do harm, both as individuals and as a community.

During Lent, God invites us to slow down. To live intentionally. We live in a world where we have constant access to information, where our buzzing phones and computers and tablets so often demand our attention. If it's not a device demanding our attention, it's probably something else: a job, a person, a project.

*Slow down.*

Pay attention. Things *must* change. We are not here forever.

Blow the trumpet in Zion. Sanctify a fast.

Ash Wednesday is here to remind us of what we always know but rarely acknowledge: we are dust, and we will return to dust. We are not infinite. We are mortal. We are God's beloved dust.

In her poem *Otherwise*, Jane Kenyon captured the spirit of what Ash Wednesday wants to teach us. It goes like this:

*"I got out of bed on two strong legs.*

*It might have been otherwise.*

*I ate cereal, sweet milk, ripe, flawless peach. It might have been otherwise.*

*I took the dog uphill to the birch wood.  
All morning I did the work I love.  
At noon I lay down with my mate. It might have been otherwise.  
We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks. It might have been otherwise.  
I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls, and  
planned another day  
just like this day.  
But one day, I know, it will be otherwise.”*

So, let's wake up. Let's slow down before it is otherwise. Let's listen more closely to God's voice in the silence. This could be a moment that changes your life, that calls you to pay attention: one day, things will be otherwise. Let's at least be able to say that we lived our fullest and did all the good we could in the time we had.

From dust you came, to dust you shall return. We are dust, but we are beloved dust, given love and blessing and opportunity to enjoy. So let us pay attention, squeeze our loved ones, listen to God, and pay attention, before we are called home, where “otherwise” is in God's loving presence. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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