



ASH WEDNESDAY

FIRST READING: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

OR ISAIAH 58:1-12, following

A reading from Joel.

¹Blow 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—
²a 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.

¹²Yet even now, says the LORD,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
 ¹³rend 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.
¹⁴Who 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?

¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
 ¹⁶gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
gather the children,
 even infants at the breast. ▶

FIRST READING (Joel)

The darkness and invasion images are a reference to “the day of the locust”—a plague of locusts. This threat is immediate and extraordinary, and the tone of the reading is ominous. Bring a sense of urgency to the reading. It is a complex text. Pay particular attention to the paragraph divisions (and pause when you come to them), because they often mark a change to a new voice—that of the prophet or that of the Lord—or the introduction of a new idea. For that reason, include a break between lines one and two in verse 13 as well.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.

¹⁷Between 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?’”

The word of the Lord. *or* Word of God, word of life.

OR: Isaiah 58:1-12

A reading from Isaiah.

¹Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
²Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.

³“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

FIRST READING (Isaiah) *Isaiah = eye-ZAY-uh*

The voice in verses 1–5 is that of an angry God—even a bitingly sarcastic God. That tone abruptly shifts at verse 6 to one of impassioned instruction. The text’s images are rich and varied. Help the assembly hear each and every one by reading slowly and enunciating.

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

¹¹The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

The word of the Lord. *or* Word of God, word of life.

PSALMODY: Psalm 51:1-17

SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

A reading from Second Corinthians.

^{20b}We entreat you on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled to God.

²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin,
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{6:1}As we work together with him,
we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

²For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time;
see, now is the day of salvation!

³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way,
so that no fault may be found with our ministry,

⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way:
through great endurance,

in afflictions, hardships, calamities,

⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots,
labors, sleepless nights, hunger;

⁶by purity, knowledge, patience,
kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love,

⁷truthful speech, and the power of God;

with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;

⁸in honor and dishonor,

in ill repute and good repute.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;

⁹as unknown, and yet are well known;

as dying, and see—we are alive;

as punished, and yet not killed;

¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;

as poor, yet making many rich;

as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

The word of the Lord. *or* Word of God, word of life.

SECOND READING

The author urges the reader (and the reader will urge the hearer) to be imitators of the apostles as servants of God who have lived commendably. Urges means the issue is urgent. “Now is the acceptable time” for this kind of living. It is for this kind of life that we have accepted the grace of God.

GOSPEL: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The holy gospel according to Matthew.

「Jesus said to the disciples:」

¹“Beware of practicing your piety before others
in order to be seen by them;
for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you,
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets,
so that they may be praised by others.

Truly I tell you,
they have received their reward.

³But when you give alms,
do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

⁴so that your alms may be done in secret;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites;
for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners,
so that they may be seen by others.

Truly I tell you,
they have received their reward.

⁶But whenever you pray,
go into your room and shut the door
and pray to your Father who is in secret;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites,
for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.

Truly I tell you,
they have received their reward.

¹⁷But when you fast,
put oil on your head and wash your face,

¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others
but by your Father who is in secret;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,
where moth and rust consume
and where thieves break in and steal; ▶

GOSPEL *hypocrites = HIP-uh-crits* *synagogues = SIN-uh-gogz*

Explore the natural rhythm of the text generated by the three repeated phrases: “whenever,” “truly I tell you,” and “but when.” From the outset the reading is about “where your heart is.” Allow all four illustrations—almsgiving, prayer, fasting, and worldly goods—to lead the hearer to the powerful conclusion of verse 21. A pause before that crucial verse might be just the thing to help the assembly hear it clearly.

²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
where neither moth nor rust consumes
and where thieves do not break in and steal.

²¹For where your treasure is,
there your heart will be also.”

The gospel of the Lord.