Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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"Return to me with your whole heart ..." (Joel 2:12).

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-18; *2 Cor 5:20—6:2*; *Matt 6:1-6, 16-18*

The start of Lent today has me thinking of specifics I can do, or do without, for the next six weeks to get my life better focused and purposeful. The war in Ukraine goes

on relentlessly, and the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria send heart-wrenching images each day to remind us of life's uncertainties. The world has felt like Lent for a long time. How do we make sense of so much suffering? Today's Scripture readings draw me back to the purpose of this penitential season, which is to get my relationship with God in order.

The reading from Joel is a call to "return to God with your whole heart." It is about restoring the centrality of God and the Great Commandment to love God with my whole heart, mind, soul and strength. Sin in this perspective is not so much about moral failings or bad habits as losing touch with God, forgetting to begin everything I think, say and do with a nod to God, the organizing principle of my existence and faith.

In the Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to practice the three habits that kept him and his fellow Jews focused on God and neighbor: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. But he adds this twist: Do these in secret lest they become matters of self-improvement or for approval. Do them as an interior rebuilding of your intimacy with God, who "sees" us in secret. It is by repairing and restarting this relationship that we will take care of everything else, put order back into our lives, rebalance and integrate the many aspects of our daily activities that tend to fragment and distract us from what is most important.

I imagine a Lent during which I constantly remind myself that God "sees" me. This is more than just surveillance. We exist because God sees us, knows us and loves us. It is the essence of prayer (praise, gratitude, sorrow and petition) for us to gaze back at God, to make this encounter mutual, a friendship.

God knows I need to pay more attention to those around me, extend my personal concerns beyond a comfort zone of survival that I have come to justify. But this has isolated me from opportunities to love and serve, which makes me unhappy. God and I will spend the next six weeks getting to know each other better, and that should take care of everything else. With God's help, this is what I can do for Lent.

Editor's note: In the weeks ahead, as Lent leads to Holy Week, many of the scripture readings will reflect the political and religious divisions and uncertainty that roiled Judaism and the earliest decades of Christianity. Our reflections will take into consideration that the texts contain language that historically served to foster ugly stereotypes and fuel ancient hostility toward Jews. The Catholic Church took a huge

step toward correcting those perceptions in the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate.* More than 50 years after the promulgation of that document, the church is still wrestling with how to interpret our sacred texts in light of new research and understanding. A good point of reference is a 2019 talk by Pope Francis to the Pontifical Biblical Institute as it addressed the topic, “Jesus and the Pharisees: An Interdisciplinary Reappraisal.” He spoke of the need to “find ways to overcome ancient prejudices.”

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco_20190509_pont-istitutobiblico.html