

February 18, 2026—Ash Wednesday  
The Rev. James Wyatt

## Return to Me

The book of the prophet Joel paints a pretty bleak picture of an apocalyptic event—and at first, in chapter 1, it's clear that he's talking about a plague of locusts. But then here in chapter 2, he refers to a great and powerful army... but then in the verses we skipped over in today's reading, he describes that army as having "the appearance of horses, and like war horses they charge... Like warriors they charge, like soldiers they scale the wall... they climb up into the houses; they enter through the windows like a thief..." and it sounds a lot like a nightmare swarm of demon locusts straight out of a D&D monster manual. In fact, I can't rule out the possibility that I wrote a swarm of demon locusts for a D&D book sometime in the last twenty-some years. Anyway, the fact is that both swarms of locusts and invading armies were all too common threats for the people of ancient Israel and Judah. And I think what's important about Joel, and the reason we read this passage on Ash Wednesday, is what Joel calls the people to do in the face of this nightmarish danger.

"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing." Joel—like John the Baptist five hundred-some years later—calls the nation to repentance.

I realized that when I hear the word "repent," the picture that forms in my mind is a cartoon I saw in my childhood, probably a Wizard of Id comic strip, of a guy holding a sign that said "Repent! The end is nigh." And I remember not knowing what that word meant! I think that pretty much tells you all you need to know about my childhood religious education.

But the thing is, that somewhere along the line between Joel and John the Baptist and that old cartoon and the guy standing at the edge of our parking lot on Sunday morning holding a sign saying, "Stop sinning or hell," the idea of repentance has changed. Nowadays we tend to think of repentance as an individual act of feeling sorry for your sins and changing your wicked ways. I don't know what sins the guy here on Sunday thought we were guilty of—maybe letting women speak in church, or maybe loving our neighbors too much—but he seemed to be concerned that if we didn't individually repent and change our wicked ways that each of us would be condemned to hell.

To the modern mind, repentance looks like each of us individually saying, "I'm so sorry for my sins"—whatever those sins might be. And to be sure, there are lots of ways we can do better. I'm thinking in particular of Pope Leo's invitation to refrain from words that hurt, and to cultivate kindness and respect. Sure, that's a great idea. I love it. Let's do that, not just in Lent, but all year round.

But to Joel, I think repentance looks more like all of us, as a community, saying, "Our hearts are breaking for the sin among us, the systems of oppression that keep people in poverty and sickness, the violence that suppresses dissent, the hatred of the other, the fear that is breaking us apart. Our hearts are breaking for the anxiety that is wearing away our goodwill, the despair that eats at our faith and hope, the sense that the whole world is just broken and beyond repair. Our hearts are breaking for the wars that are raging around the world and especially for the wars being waged in our name. Our hearts are breaking for the people who have been trampled underfoot by the rich and powerful who think they are immune to consequences, and we cry out in righteous anger at the people sitting at the top of all these unjust systems who don't lift a finger to change them because they benefit so much from all the suffering they cause." Repentance means turning to God and pouring all of that lamentation out at God's feet. "Return to me with all your heart," God invites us through Joel, "with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

In a few minutes, we're going to pray together a litany of repentance that includes both kinds of repentance—both an expression of sorrow for our individual sins and an expression of

lamentation for the sinful and broken world around us. Both are important. But this Lent, at least, I am much more interested in that second kind of repentance. This Lent, I want us to return to God with all our hearts, I want us to lament together over all the injustice and violence and hatred we see in the world all around us. I want us to pour it all out at God's feet, together.

And "who knows whether God will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind?"

That is my prayer for us as we enter this holy season of Lent: that as we return to the Lord our God, "who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love," as we pour out our lamentation "with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning," that we will continue to be transformed in the image of Christ, from glory to glory, and that through us the world may also be transformed as the glorious commonwealth of heaven blossoms here on earth. Amen.