



**“Walking With God”**

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Hayward, California***

***Ash Wednesday  
February 25, 2009  
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
Psalm 51  
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10***

**SCRIPTURE READINGS**

**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**

Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
    for the day of God is coming, it is near,  
a day of shadow and gloom,  
    a day of clouds and dense shadow!  
Like a blanket there is spread upon the mountains  
    a great and powerful people;  
their like has never been from of old,  
    nor will be again after them  
    through the years of all generations.  
“Yet even now,” says the Sovereign One,  
    “return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
    and rend your hearts and not your garments.”  
Return to the Sovereign One, your God,  
    for god is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
    and repents of evil.  
Who knows whether God will not turn and repent,  
    and leave a blessing behind,  
a cereal offering and a drink offering  
    for the Sovereign One, your God?  
Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;  
    gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
    assemble the aged;

gather the children,  
even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her chamber.  
Between the vestibule and the altar  
let the priests, the ministers of God, weep.  
Let them say, "Spare your people, O Sovereign One,  
and make not your heritage a reproach,  
a byword among the nations.

### **Psalm 51**

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin!  
For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you only, have I sinned,  
and done that which is evil in your sight,  
So that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless in your judgment.  
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
and in sin did my mother conceive me.  
Behold, you desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.  
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be cleaner than snow.  
Fill me with joy and gladness;  
let the bones which you have broken rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Joel 2:12-17, *An Inclusive Language Lectionary: Readings for Year B*, National Council of Churches, 1984, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 51, *An Inclusive Language Lectionary: Readings for Year B*, National Council of Churches, 1984, p. 69.

## 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10<sup>1</sup>

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making an appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For 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! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

### SERMON

Tonight, in scripture and in song, we have been on a very, very long walk. We have traveled from a land consumed by an environmental disaster of epic proportions to the country of a flawed but righteous king to a time when a letter-writing evangelist nurtured small communities of faith that would grow to be the sole religion of a mighty empire.

We have moved through centuries of ancient history where other people in other times have walked with God. While we have learned much along the way, it is of God that we have learned the most.

We started our journey with the prophet Joel in the ancient land of Judah, the southern kingdom of the Hebrew people, five or six centuries before the birth of Christ. Joel blows a trumpet of warning – a plague of locusts and a severe drought have brought calamity to the land. What the flying insects have not devoured has been destroyed by the lack of rainfall. Nothing is left – not even the grain and wine needed for the ritual offering to God. Cut off from communion with God and surrounded by dead and dying crops and animals, the prophet Joel proclaims that the dual disaster was a divine consequence for the people's failure to recognize that Yahweh alone was God. He calls upon the people and their priests to lament and fast as a form of penance.

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<sup>1</sup> II Cor. 5:20b-6:12, Victor R. Gold, ed. *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Convinced that the total collapse around him is a sign of the imminent final judgment of his people, Joel thunders that even now God's army approaches. Just as his doom and gloom scenario approaches its climactic ending, Joel's voice softens with truth. Despite the dire appearance of their circumstances, Joel sees hope, and that hope is the nature of God as he knows it, as he has learned from the elders and the history of his nation. He says, if the people will return to God, if the people will only show God that they regret their desertion of him through fasting and mourning, God will almost certainly forgive them, for God is gracious and merciful. God is slow to anger and abounds in steadfast love for the people.

As Joel's voice fades away, we traveled on in song to the time of King David. Psalm 51, which we sang as Give Me a Clean Heart, was long considered the personal prayer of King David, who sought God's forgiveness for seducing the beautiful Bathsheba and arranging for the murder of her husband Uriah so that he might marry her. We can imagine David, keenly aware that he has broken half of the Ten Commandments, including the prohibitions against adultery and murder, begging God for forgiveness, for a clean heart, and a new and right spirit.

David's repentance and faith in God's transforming power is rewarded. Though his life is not without sorrow, David retains his kingdom and lives on as monarch until his old age, showing us that God hears true repentance and the prayers even of those who err in the gravest fashion and will restore and covenant with them again.

We ended our journey with the Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians in the first century. Paul had founded the little church of Christian converts in Corinth and lived with them for awhile. After he leaves to continue his ministry in other parts of the Aegean, problems spring up in Corinth, problems that sound familiar to the modern ear. There are conflicts between Paul and certain members of the church, there are disputes between the members themselves, there is reluctance among members to raise the money that Paul has promised the apostles in Jerusalem, and there is competition in town – another missionary has established a base and is stealing Paul's converts away. Paul writes to the Corinthians to smooth feathers, to cajole their participation in his project, to reinforce their convictions, but most importantly to remind them that though their salvation is through belief in Christ, it is not a one-time act of acceptance but a journey, an ongoing walk with God where, though great hardships come their way, they must place reconciliation with God at the heart of their lives.

When we stumble and fall, Paul says, in our walk with God – and we will – we must rise and return to the path where God, who has reconciled us to him through Christ, waits patiently for our return.

What we have learned in our walk with God tonight, is that we are ordinary people, like Joel, David, and Paul. Do we not suffer the same situations today: economic collapse, personal misconduct, and conflict with others? Yes, we are ordinary, but we have an Extraordinary God. We have a God that through time has shown willingness to run to us when we turn to him with awareness and regret of how our life has departed from our mutual walk.

As we traveled through scripture and song tonight, I meditated on my own walk with God that has led me from the simplicity of childhood belief, to atheism in my twenties, to agnosticism in my thirties, and now, to the renewed faith of a middle-aged woman.

Like many who seek refuge in a progressive church, I have never been completely comfortable with the words “sin” or “sinner”. As words, they seem harsh to me, most likely because popular culture shows them used more often as slurs or coercive put-downs, than in the graceful and Biblical way we hear them in our church. I am drawn, instead, to other, more gentle, imagery for the act of turning away from God. My favorite, of course, is from baseball. In baseball, it is so completely acceptable that mistakes will be made that they are recorded as any other statistic and, with more or less fanfare, show up in bright lights on a scoreboard when they are made. We know these as errors and they can be attributed to any player who fails to make the play that could have reasonably been expected of them.

Therefore, in the spirit of the season of Lent, allow me to confess three “errors”; three ways I have erred in my walk with God.

First, I have treated God like the ranger in the kiosk at the park where I hike. I realize that while I sometimes stop in and ask for a map; more often than not, I just smile and wave as I walk by, believing that I know where I am going and that I can get there on my own. I have not stopped to pray for direction before I depart and I have not asked for consultation when I encountered roadblocks. I have, however, as you might imagine, cried for help when completely lost.

Second, unlike Robert Frost, who was drawn to the path that was grassy and wanted wear, I have taken the road “more traveled” by. I have often left God at that “T” in the road and gone on by myself. I have let other walkers, with different values and mores, determine both my destination and my path. I have followed trails that were well-worn by others following the big, bright signs of our culture: individualism and achievement. I have been disappointed when these routes have not taken me to higher levels as I had been led to expect, but have forced me in endless circles, often passing within inches of where I started. In my disappointment and sense of failed expectation, I have felt lost and confused and resentful of others and of God.

Third, in my desperation to return, I have taken spiritual shortcuts, and instead of finding a quick way back, I have fallen into ravines of poison ivy. I have made my situation – and my morale – worse by presuming that it was not necessary to review my route, to retrace my steps, to return on the path by which I came, and to confront, face to face, the God who waits for me at the trailhead of my departure.

In these three ways, I have erred. The scoreboard shows I have ignored, left, and attempted to avoid God in my walk. I have turned from God when my need was greatest.

As you might imagine of someone who feels uncomfortable with words like sin and sinner, I have always had a somewhat magnanimous view of God's forgiveness. My personal interpretation has been that it is given freely, widely, unconditionally, and immediately. Truly, I have believed that forgiveness is ours as soon as we need or want it. I know I'm not alone or a newcomer to this idea. Hannah Whitall Smith wrote in 1875 that it was essential to an unwavering walk with God that consciousness of having sinned (sigh, there's that word) ought to bring consciousness of being forgiven. In other words, belief in forgiveness allows us to keep our eyes on God and on the path we walk with God.

As a parent of a six-year-old who is more the wild and woolly type than the meek and mild kind you see on television, I have come to wonder about this view of forgiveness. I have spent much of the last six years trying to teach my child to recognize how we should treat others, how everyone makes mistakes, and what we do when our mistakes negatively affect other people. Getting a small child to stand, look someone in the eye, and say with sincerity, "I'm sorry," is not easy, as anyone who has seen these mini-dramas played out at home, on the playground, or even here at church, knows. But, I think almost every parent would agree, it is one of the most vital things we teach our children. Without the ability to recognize that you have hurt someone and the courage to be honest about your mistakes and the ability to express regret and seek forgiveness, you simply cannot function effectively or successfully with others in a family, in a friendship, or in society.

I stand here today and meditate on the question of why I would treat God with less courtesy and consideration than I would expect my six-year-old to show to me or her friends. Why am I so quick to assume, to take for granted, God's forgiveness for my errors? Why do I treat God like a great scoreboard in the sky, assuming that, without action or thought on my part, my errors are zeroed out and the board is turned off at the end of the game? Can I really, truly return to the One I unceremoniously left on the path of life without a word of regret, assuming that we will begin our walk again without apology, without comment? How do I stand, admit my errors, express regret, and ask for forgiveness?

This isn't a question about God, for I know with certainty that forgiveness is mine as it is yours. This is a question about me, a question about how I relate to God as the one that made me and made the path we share. And this isn't a question to be answered quickly or in a facile manner. This is a question to ponder tonight and tomorrow and perhaps for forty more days as I journey with Jesus through the wilderness, through his temptations, through his witness of God, and to his resurrection.

I invite you to join me in exploring the question of how I – how we – should relate to God on this journey through Lent knowing that I – and maybe you – may have treated God like the ranger in the kiosk at the park where I hike, that I – and maybe you too – have insisted on leaving God at the “T” in the road and followed only the well-worn paths, and that I – and maybe you too – have become lost, traveled in circles, and resorted to spiritual and painful shortcuts in a desperate effort to return.

As we reflect on our errors and on our relationship with God, we can take comfort from the reminder that God walked with the ancients and they grew to know God and God's compassionate ways. Through their words, we know that while God walks with all of us, not all of us walk with God, all of the time. As certain as we can be that we will turn from God, so can we be that God will be there to receive us when our eyes are opened and we return with heartfelt awareness, regret, and desire for forgiveness.

We each have our own journey with God. In this season of Lent, may you come to know where you are now, may you return with humility to the One who loves and accepts you, and may you always feel the certainty of God's forgiveness as you travel on in faithfulness.

Amen.