

## “Rend Your Hearts”

Psalm 51

Joel 2:1-2, 10-17

I heard a story once about a young man who was given to gossip. He spread stories all over town about a friend of his. When word got back to the friend, he apologized to him – and he meant it. But a wise old teacher sought out the young man. He said, “You may think that you have made everything right, but you haven’t. Come with me,” he said, “I want to show you something.” The old teacher took the young man to the top of a cliff and handed him a feather pillow. “Take this,” the teacher said, “and rip it open.” As the young man did so, a gust of wind came past and caught the feathers – hundreds of them – slowly carrying them off into the distance and eventually out of sight. The two men watched this for a while. Confused, the young man asked, “teacher, what is the meaning of this?” The teacher replied, “now, go and retrieve the feathers.” The young man snorted in disbelief, “I can’t! They have blown away and I couldn’t possibly find them again.” The teacher said, “so it is with your sin. Once it leaves your lips and your hands, it goes out to the world and takes on a life of its own. You can no more take it back than you could find every single one of those feathers.”

Sin has a far reaching impact in our lives, in our relationships, and in our communities – often a much greater one than we’d care to admit. Sin and evil hold great power in our world and our best intentions cannot undo that reality. In the reading from Joel, we hear about the day of judgment - about G-d coming as the head of a terrible army that reckons with the darkness that distorts G-d’s good creation. The army is depicted as a destructive force and an angry one for one simple reason: we matter to G-d. On the surface, this might not seem quite like the love that we’re used to hearing about, but it depicts G-d very powerfully saying that the darkness is not what G-d wants for the world. Even more, G-d loves us and wants us to grow in peace and

wisdom and faith. G-d wants us to worship with gladness, to give with generous hearts, to love each one we meet because G-d first loved us. When we hurt each other, when we hurt ourselves, we hurt G-d, too. And in passages like this one, we see that that makes G-d sad and that makes G-d angry.

It is not that G-d expects us to be perfectly good; it is not that G-d has told us that we have to solve the problem of sin and evil ourselves. But G-d made a way for us to be free from the power of sin and evil, and yet we sometimes act as people who have no hope, who have no saving grace, who have no Jesus.

Here, in the season of Lent, we can take sin and evil seriously. We can search our lives and our thoughts, and rededicate ourselves to our faith without fear precisely because in Christ G-d has made a way for us. It is safe for us to grieve and to be honest about our failings. We can fast and pray, weep and mourn. We can rend our hearts and offer to G-d a humble spirit, knowing that, as Joel tells us, “G-d is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Rend your hearts so that you can peer inside. Rend your hearts, knowing that G-d has forgiven whatever chokes out the light. Rend your hearts because sometimes that vulnerability clears more space for Christ to enter in.

Friends, as you receive the ash this evening, remember that Lent is not a burden that we must bear. It is an opportunity to shed what weighs us down, to remember Christ’s saving death as a turning point of our spiritual lives, and to embrace the mercy and new life that Jesus grants us. We may weep at the power of the darkness, but we hold fast to the light that conquers all. Friends, the feathers of fallout from our sin do not define us. We are sons and daughters of the living G-d. Amen.