

Ash Wednesday 2008

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17     Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

What does Hasidic Jewish reggae singer Matisyahu, Diet Pepsi, and the prophet Joel all have in common? Did you see the Diet Pepsi commercial? All those different people doing the falling asleep head-bob ... I had a class right after lunch, in college with my advisor, and without fail I'd do the head-bob and wind up asleep before the end of class. Pepsi's solution? Drink their new diet/ ginsing, extra caffeinated pop.

Matisyahu was interviewed on PBS and likened growing in faith to weight training, but currently we don't have anything that is really pushing against us, like putting another weight on the bar. Instead, what we are fighting against is a silent death ... a spiritual sleep ... to awaken up that spiritual connection and reconnect to God and live.<sup>1</sup>

The prophet Joel sees this silent death of comfort, ease, and complacency has brought the Ancient Israelites on the brink of destruction. They have forgotten their identity is first and foremost in God. They don't see the erosion of their culture, community, infrastructure, and relationships. So, Joel breaks in and says, "Sound the trumpets in Zion." Emergency alert. The

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.pbs.org/jewishamericans/watch/clip\\_10-3.html](http://www.pbs.org/jewishamericans/watch/clip_10-3.html)

enemy is coming, the threat is real, and God is not going to stop it from happening.

I'd like to add one more voice in the mix:

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, the many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand, which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to God that made us. It behooves us, then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness. (President Abraham Lincoln's Proclamation for a National Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, April 30, 1863)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <sup>2</sup> <http://www.homiliesbyemail.com/Special/ashwed/ashwed-sigs.txt> , (Copyright (r) 2006 Homilies By Email)

Any guesses who wrote this? One of the current op-ed pieces from the New York Times? No. This was spoken by Abraham Lincoln in his Proclamation for a National Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer, April 30, 1863.

We know the alarms are sounding. The creation is crying out. Peoples around the world die from hunger, thirst, disease, and genocide everyday. And maybe that is too far away, but you cannot deny the weariness of trying to keep up the pace of work, family, activities, school, and staying ahead of the bills. Or that feeling around retirement: of bodies not able to do what they used to do, not knowing what matters anymore, and if there is anyplace you are needed. Our voices join the rest, “What then shall we do?” as we sense the silent death and perceive the urgency of the trumpet call, but feel so overwhelmed that we don’t know how to raise our heads.

It is for this reason that we gather around this ancient ritual of Ash Wednesday. ... That we come and receive ashes on our foreheads, a sign of our mortality, a sign of all our failed attempts to do something, and a reminder of who we are, because of the only action that matters; Jesus’ death on the cross, so we would live. And with the ashes we hear, “Remember you are dust and dust you shall return.” And with the cross, we remember another ritual, our baptism ... where we are forever bound to the identity of Christ and

claimed as children of God. “ \_\_\_\_\_, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever.”

Ashes, cross, and God’s word of promise. What then shall we do? For the people of Joel’s time, I am sure they wanted to hear instructions about battle strategies, maybe create a stronghold that they could protect themselves from the blast, maybe collect enough wealth to buy the enemy off. There had to be something productive they could do, so they wouldn’t be sitting ducks before the looming attack. But, Joel says, “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

Again, the question is how? All of us wants to be spiritually alive, to be awake, to better sense what God’s way is. And if you go to any Barnes and Noble, you can get self-help books and spiritual how-to books by the dozens. And many are helpful, but I think we are so conditioned to search out the big and flashy and sound byte that we make it more complicated than it needs to be. Joel says “gather the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants, ... interrupt the wedding, get the priests and the ministers and enter into a time of prayer and fasting.” Not when it is

convenient or when you have time or if you get immediate results ... it is time for God.

That may sound overly strong, because we are here and we are in assembly before God in prayer and worship. So, we go back to the ashes, our wake up call. Sadly, the times that I really hear folks examine their lives, let go of the baggage, really celebrate the life they have been given by God is when they have brushed up against death. Suddenly, there is a flash of what is really important, but also a realization that we are not in control. For some, this leads to despair and maybe an eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we all die attitude. But, I think God intends for our mortality to be the very thing that frees us to live as God intends ... as Jesus' death and resurrection opens up to us, abundant life now and forever. It prevents us from relying on our accumulation of wealth or physical beauty or vast knowledge or anything else we can dream up, to be the source of our meaning and purpose ... our treasure. Those are the things that lull us to sleep and a life of complacency and running.

Instead, tonight we are invited to return to the Lord our God and rediscover what is not far off. Tonight we turn and follow a different way of living, by entering a 40-day pilgrimage of prayer, fasting, and charity. Not for

recognition or a pat on the back that you didn't drink pop for a month or as means to get into God's good graces. But, as a means to grow more deeply in your sense of who God is and as you do that, you discover more fully who you are, and when you know the strengths and gifts God has given you and equipped you with as a child of God, then you can serve God's kingdom with joy and freedom and new life.

God wants you to wake up; wake up to life you have been given, the freedom you have in Christ, and the joy of walking according to God's way of life. God has given us tools, spiritual practices, means of entering our own Spring Training, if you follow baseball, to discover what this relationship is like that Christ reconciled us into with God. These practices involve setting aside time and space for God, but they don't need a degree or special training to enter into this life of dependence and trust with God, just a willingness to turn.

- 1) Prayer – it can be done anywhere, anytime, but to really get a sense of what God is up to in this world, it involves more than talking ... it also needs time for silence, listening, and observing the world around you.
- 2) Fasting – it involves recognizing something you covet, desire, depend upon possibly more than God and then going without it for a certain period of time. You do need to be careful that it doesn't become

something you seek recognition for and as you fast it moves you back to God and your thankfulness for God's provision.

3) Charity – Giving, especially percentage giving of your income is a powerful spiritual discipline that encourages you to a life of gratitude, trust in God's ongoing gifts, and helps you learn how to let go of control, as you give without expectation for recognition, thanks or how the gift will be used. Since everything is given from God, we trust God to use what we return to the church or charities to build up the kingdom and serve those in need.

All these practices are given to turn you away from your desires, need for control, and the world's vision for meaning and purpose, toward God and God's will. This is but an introduction to these practices, but choose one to explore more deeply and help wake you up this Lenten season. Wake up to the promise you have in Christ Jesus your savior, the one who is your center and source of life ... the one who gave you a new name, child of God, and calls you into a way and truth and life that radiates God's glory and love.

And no one will be able to ask again, "Where is their God?" Amen.