"Who can abide the day of his coming?" Perhaps you remember that awesome and repeated line from Handel's Messiah. It is taken from Joel 2:11 and provides the context for Ash Wednesday's first lesson. A devastating locust plague prefigured for Joel the great Day of Yahweh. The cadences of Joel 2:1-11 describe what it would mean to fall as sinner into the hands of God. But Joel is no fear-monger. Rather, he calls for healthy and hopeful penitence. How?

_Even now_ The time is late but not too late; the situation is urgent, but not without hope.

_Says the Lord_ Prophets used this claim to authority almost as if it were small change. Yet this is the only time Joel uses it, making vv. 12-19 the center of his message.

_Return to me_ Joel does not specify what was wrong in the community's behavior. While every repentance involves turning from something, it also always involves turning to Someone. Every Lenten deprivation has as its goal a clearer focus on the Lord and the Lord's saving works.

_Rend your hearts and not your garments_ No halfhearted, external acts of contrition will do. No playing to the galleries, Jesus demands, when we fast, pray, or perform acts of charity. The repentance is to be internal and personal, and yet also the repentance of the entire community. Calls for repentance during Lent should be addressed to whole congregations, as well as to individuals.

_For he is merciful_ The motivation for our turning is God's character and patience, not our terror or lust for survival. We repent because of the cross which stands at the end of our Lenten pilgrimage. The greatness of God's love gives us courage to repent.

_He changes his mind about evil_ That is, God decides not to carry out his decrees of disaster. The Lord is not hung up with the consistencies of being a righteous God.

_Who knows whether he will turn_ God turns too! The master is not above the disciple. Still, God's turning cannot be banked on or taken for granted. It is the miraculous product of abounding steadfast love. The famous "perhaps" in Amos (5:15) or the "who knows" here in Joel are not to make us think God is capricious. But God is sovereign and free, not to be manipulated or bribed. Turning and forgiving are God's choice. The urgency of the "even now" is never to be forgotten.

_And leave behind a blessing_ God does not only deal in religious terms and theological concepts. Grain, wine, and oil, too, are signs of such goodness. Those who receive them know from where they came and are ready to give them back directly or indirectly, that is, as gifts to the least of these servants of the Lord.

_Gather the people_ All the people. Joel called for the elders and the unweaned
children to repent. He made no exception for the bride and groom who might seem to be distracted with other interests. And if the laity are to repent, how much more the priests.

*Have pity, Lord, on your people* Such daring; such insight. Like the tax collector we come before God as beggars, but we also come as God's people. We are not strangers or aliens. The people to whom we preach are not a bunch of totally depraved rascals. They are, just as we are, God's daughters and sons. Even when we repent, we can never let God forget that.

*Why should they say among the nations, "Where is their God?"* Our longing for God is sometimes shown by how strongly we are willing to bargain with God. If you let me die, the Psalmist told God, there might be no one left to praise you. (Ps. 30:9) It would be in your own best interest, God, to keep me alive. What would happen to God's reputation if "God's" people would become a "no" people. What would the neighbors in Edom, Moab, and Ammon say?

*The Lord was jealous for his land; he spared his people* The prophet reports as an accomplished fact what God's response to true repentance will be. Because of God's track record throughout Israel's history, Joel knew in his heart of hearts that once more God would come through.

Preachers on Ash Wednesday know that God will come through because in Jesus Christ he came through. They call themselves and their people to assess their present behavior in view of what our sins cost God on the cross. Daughters and sons of God can never be jaded by his forgiveness, which, after all, is a contradiction of the law-and-order of the universe. But daughters and sons know that their family ties to God legitimate and necessitate repentance and hope. Ash Wednesday is a summons to a closer union with God (return to me) from whatever byways we, individually and collectively, have sought out when we did not take God's love seriously. And the cross shows he is serious about love.

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