

ASH WEDNESDAY 2016
HOMILY-SAINT JOSEPH PARISH
FATHER CRAIG LOONEY
JOEL 2.12 St. MATTHEW 6.16



They listened! They took action! They made changes in their lives! God was pleased.

800 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Jonah went to Ninevah, the capital of the great kingdom of Assyria, in present day Iraq. The Book of Jonah describes Ninevah as a “wicked city” that had gotten God’s attention.

Jonah told the people of Ninevah to take a good look at themselves and their behavior. He told them they would only bring destruction on themselves by continuing to act the way they were. He told them God had created everything and he was above all a God of love and mercy...love and mercy they could experience by turning away from bad behavior.

The people of Ninevah listened to Jonah. They believed what he said and asked for God’s mercy and compassion. They took action. They made changes in their lives. They turned away from their destructive behavior. Even the King of Assyria listened and took action. He came down from his throne and to show they were serious about changing their behavior, he and all the people of Ninevah put on burlap bags and covered their faces with dirt...they repented and promised to do better.

About 300 years later the prophet Joel picks up the story where Jonah left off. Joel wrote at a time when Palestine was experiencing a terrible invasion of locusts and a devastating drought. Joel encouraged the people to turn away from sinful behavior and turn back toward God. He told them what God wanted to see was a changed heart...a change of clothes was not enough.

Lent is about change in our hearts...about taking a good hard look at our lives and then starting the journey that leads us back to God. Our lives can get messy...but not so messy we are beyond God’s reach. He offers love and mercy...and with his love and mercy comes restoration to wholeness. We do have to want that restoration and wholeness and it begins when we turn around.

The people of Ninevah covered their faces with dirt as a sign of repentance and to show they were serious about making changes in their lives. The ashes on our foreheads remind us of what we read in the Book of Genesis...we will all die some day and our bodies will return to the dust from which they are made. But that is not the end of the story.

Lent is a time of repentance...repentance literally means to turn around...to turn back...to say we are sorry for the bad things we have done and to make a fresh start. The process begins when we admit to ourselves we need forgiveness...and to forgive others.

The ashes are a sign we take Lent seriously...we are going to use this time of reflection and self-examination to change our lives for the better...beginning with changing our hearts. The ashes are in the shape of the cross because it is by the cross and Jesus’ ultimate gift of love we are healed and restored to God.

Lent is about the journey to the cross that does not end on Good Friday. Our Wednesday Lenten Study this year will include readings from Scripture, prayer, thoughtful meditation and corporate prayer as we walk “With Jesus to the Cross.” What comes after Good Friday is the Resurrection.

Let’s listen! Let’s take action! Let’s make changes in our lives for the better! Let’s begin a journey filled with hope!

