

[BLANK] Return. Return to God. “Return to God with your whole heart,” said the prophet Joel, “with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Return to loving the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and loving your neighbor as yourself. God wants us to love God, and to love everyone like God. And we don’t do it. We turn our lives elsewhere. We choose our own paths, we make our own gods out of our success, our families’ success, our own passions, our own fears and pains. God is ready to give us everything good that will last forever, and we turn away. And so, God gives us a chance. To return. Before we cannot return.

The Hebrew word for “return” that Joel uses is pronounced “shuv.” It is a word that is used over a thousand times in various forms in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes it means just that, to turn our course back to where we came from. Other times it means more clearly that we should repent, that we should turn our hearts away from sin, and return to loving God. And sometimes, it means something like a plow turning the soil of the ground, a folding of something torn away into what it came from.

In all of its meanings, “shuv” seems to make one thing very clear: turning back to God is not just about what we do ourselves. We are not just changing course: we are returning to those who we left behind. We are not just turning our hearts: like the prodigal son from Jesus’ parable, we are opening our hearts to the ones who we turned from, the ones who can not only forgive us but empower us to be who God wants us to be. We are not just putting something back from where it came: we are opening us, and the people who we come back to, for new life-giving possibilities.

Return. Return to God. Because apart from God, and the people of God, we are lost at sea, thinking that we will make it on our own, only to discover that the story of life is never about what we do on our own in the vastness of God’s creation, but what we can do together with the God who gave life to everyone and everything. Return. Return to God, and God’s love. Because without it, we practice insanity, and hurt, and numbness, and despair, to the point where we are floating away into death, and not even knowing it. Return, because we are children of God, made of God’s dust, and unto God’s dust we shall all, surely, return, where the illusion of the individual “me” is shattered forever. Return. Return to God’s love now, not later, because this is, and has always been, your destiny as a child of God. The only question is whether we want to follow God’s ways now, or later. And later won’t leave us many choices.

We are God’s dust. And unto God we shall all return, sooner or later. Faith gives us a choice. We can return now, and have the love of God now, as if it’s already forever. Without that, we are just dust in the wind, returning wherever and however the wind blows us. As I burned the palm branches from last year’s Palm Sunday service, and the prayers of the people that we have been sharing since Christmas at our worship services, they would smoulder in the pot where I burned them, glow a bit, and then, in an instant, catch fire brilliantly. Most of the dust stayed in the pot, but all over me a fine dust settled from the ones that wandered away. Death will come, soon enough. The only question is whether we

will be dust that settled somewhere for no clear purpose, or whether we will be put to God's purpose, to save creation from sin and death, through faith in Jesus Christ. Return. Because to be dust in the darkness, far from the glowing warmth of God's loving purpose, is not a good place to be, now or forever.

Several years ago, I had left a job, but kept in touch with my friends there. One day, I had lunch with a good friend from my old job, just a few months after I had left, just up the street from their offices. We had a good time talking, but for some reason, I found myself encouraging my friend to leave that job. He nodded his head politely, and then we returned to his office. He offered me a free pass to a conference the next week, a conference that my old company put on every year. It was expensive to go, and so I appreciated the offer, and promised to stop by later to pick up the pass. We said goodbye, and parted our ways.

A few days later, my new job assigned me to a new project. I could have gone to the conference, but it didn't make sense anymore, so I didn't go. My friend did, along with 17 other people from my former small company, along with the many guests to the conference. The conference started on the morning of September 11th, 2001, on the 106th floor of the World Trade Center. None of my seventeen friends from work, and hundreds of other friends and colleagues, and thousands more unknown to me, ever made it home that day. All that was left of them was dust, fine dust, dust that settled everywhere in lower Manhattan, dust that we breathed in for weeks and weeks after that day. Dust that would never find a resting place as a person's remains in God's loving hands. Dust that a family could never grieve over, plant flowers over, or remember where they had put it lovingly. It was just...dust.

Tonight we begin our forty days of Lent, the forty weekdays and Saturdays between now and Easter. Lent is an invitation to return to God, and God's people, and to follow God's ways more sincerely, more deeply, more meaningfully, and to do it with one another, because we all need to rest in God's loving hands to find the peace, and hope, and joy that God offers us in bright Easter sunlight, 40 days from now. We all need to return, not just to God, but to God's loving ways, seeking out in our hearts the truth of what God is calling us towards, giving up not just money, or personal habits, but giving up focusing just on things that make us complete, but others incomplete. In Lent, we return to what we were taught in Sunday school, learning about how God's word fits into our lives together with joy, sharing it with our family and friends, turning the fertile soil of faith back to make room for new growth in our lives and other lives, nurturing one another and all around us, so that our lives can be fruitful in God's loving image for yet another season of life. In Lent, we return to practicing God's ways together, with love, so that Easter sunlight will not be just another warming Spring day but a celebration of what it feel like to never be apart from the God who we came from, and the people who God loves, as we try to love ourselves and one another as God already loves us.

Tonight, we rejoice in being children of God who are God's dust, amazingly and wonderfully made by our Creator out of nothing into life able to love, offered the perfect

blueprint of living in God's loving image through faith in Jesus Christ, and given the gift of God's Holy Spirit to form us together into that image of love, returning us to a position of honor and glory in God's creation. Tonight, we come together to celebrate being God's dust, people who have meaning and value and hope and the promise of everlasting joy, through faith in a God who created us out of dust in perfect love.

Return. Return to God's grace. Return to accepting that it is only through God's grace that we can find that unity, that love, that hope, that joy, that we need to practice in Lent, and for the rest of our lives, again, and again, and again, until the joy of God becomes our way of life, together, forever. Come, dust, made a child of God. Come, and accept the way that leads to Christ, and everlasting life. Choose turning to God. Make turning to God's love your constant habit. And watch what happens. Amen.