

**St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Perth
Wednesday, February 18th, 2026
Rev. Gerry Gallant**

**Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:12-17**

Welcome

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season in the church year known as Lent.

Lent is a time to prepare for the celebration of Easter and to renew our life in the mystery of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We begin this Holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance, and for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We begin our journey to Easter with the sign of ashes, a Biblical symbol of mourning and penitence.

This ancient sign speaks of the fragility of human life, and marks the penitence of the community of faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ,
to observe a Holy Lent
by self-examination and penitence,
by prayer and fasting,
by works of love,
and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.

Announcements

Call to Worship

We gather in humility, seeking renewal and grace.

We come as one people, ready to open our hearts.

Let us set aside distractions and enter this sacred moment.

We are invited to begin again, to draw near with honesty and reverence.

May our spirits be awakened and our lives transformed.

Together, we welcome the presence of God and the promise of new beginnings.

Prayer of Invocation and Adoration

Gracious and holy God,
You are the source of all life, the giver of every good gift.
We praise You for Your steadfast love and unending mercy.
As we enter this season of reflection,
We ask that You would quiet our minds and awaken our spirits.
Meet us in our longing, receive our worship,
And shape us by Your presence,
That we may walk in humility, hope, and renewed purpose.
Amen.

Opening Hymn

Call to Confession

As we enter this season of reflection, we are invited to lay aside all pretense and come before God with honesty. Let us acknowledge our need for mercy and open our hearts to the transforming work of grace.

Prayer of Confession

Merciful God,
We confess that we have wandered from Your ways and ignored Your call.
We have failed to love You with our whole heart, and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We have clung to pride, harbored resentment, and neglected the needs of others.
Forgive us, renew us, and lead us,
So that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways,
To the glory of Your name. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news: God's mercy is deeper than our failings, and God's love is stronger than our sin. In turning to God with sincere hearts, we are met with compassion and grace. Know that you are forgiven, set free to begin again, and empowered to walk in newness of life.

Scripture**Joel 2:12-17**

¹² “Yet even now,” declares the Lord,
 “return to me with all your heart,
 with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ and rend your hearts and not your garments.”

Return to the Lord your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
 slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
 and he relents over disaster.

¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
 a grain offering and a drink offering
 for the Lord your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 consecrate a fast;
 call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶ gather the people.

Consecrate the congregation;
 assemble the elders;
 gather the children,
 even nursing infants.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,
 and the bride her chamber.

¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar
 let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep
 and say, “Spare your people, O Lord,
 and make not your heritage a reproach,
 a byword among the nations.

Why should they say among the peoples,
 ‘Where is their God?’ ”

Sermon

Ash Wednesday is the start of the season of Lent, a time when as Christians we are called to pause, reflect on our lives, and confront the reality of our need for repentance. It is a day marked by the imposition of ashes, a visible sign of our mortality and our dependance upon God’s mercy.

The words that the prophet Joel spoke to the people who were facing calamity and judgement, right just as true today as they did when he spoke them.

Joel 2:12-14

¹² **“Yet even now,” declares the Lord,
 “return to me with all your heart,
 with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ and rend your hearts and not your garments.”**

**Return to the Lord your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
 slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
 and he relents over disaster.**

¹⁴ **Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
 a grain offering and a drink offering
 for the Lord your God?**

These words were not the call to a religious ritual, but a call to a deep heartfelt transformation.

Joel’s message is rooted in the conviction that God’s invitation to repent and follow Him is never withdrawn, no matter how dire our life situation, no matter how far we wander in our obedience to God, we are always able to repent and follow him. The call to repent is a gracious opportunity offered by a God who is always ready to receive His children.

As we begin this season of Lent, Joel’s exhortation reminds us that repentance is not just for those who feel guilty or burdened by their sin, but for all who desire to walk in fellowship with the Lord our God.

The urgency of Joel’s call is heightened by the context of impending judgment, yet it is accompanied by the assurance of God’s mercy. This tension we live with each day, between the seriousness of our sin and the mercy of God’s forgiveness, forms the backdrop of our journey through the season of Lent and the observance of Ash Wednesday.

Joel’s call to repentance is both sincere and deep. He commands, ‘**rend your hearts and not your garments**’ pointing out that God calls for more than the simple outward appearance of regret over sin.

In ancient Israel, tearing one’s garments was a customary sign of grief and mourning, it was meant to be a public display of sorrow in times of distress. Yet here Joel warns that such rituals, are sometimes empty in meaning and offensive to God.

True repentance is in the heart, it is a broken and contrite spirit that grieves over sin and longs for a restored relationship with the Lord.

Matthew Henry wrote, 'rending the heart is that which God looks for and requires; that is the broken and contrite heart which he will not despise.'

God values internal transformation, not external ritual

God seeks heartfelt repentance in His people. The rending of one's garments was only an external sign of one's sorrow, and it could be done hypocritically, where no true repentance existed. God does not want our fake sorrow and tears, he wants a change of heart.

The Hebrew word that is used here, 'shuv' means a total reorientation, a turning back to God in heart, in mind, and in will. Repentance is not simply feeling sorry for our sin or repeating some religious ritual to ask for forgiveness. Repentance is a firm and decisive movement away from sin in our lives and towards obedience in the Lord. It is a process which involves, humility, self-examination and a willingness to be changed.

This call to genuine repentance is what we came together today to acknowledge, as we enter the season of Lent and commit ourselves to a time of renewal.

Culturally, Joel's audience would have understood the significance of fasting, weeping and mourning as acts of humility and sorrow. These were expressions of a deep grief over sin and a strong desire to reconcile with God. When we place the ashes on our heads on Ash Wednesday, they are meant to be reminders for each of us of our own mortality and our willingness to humble ourselves before God, an echo of Joel's call to rend our hearts and not just our garments.

And this summoning to repentance is grounded not in fear of the punishment for continuing in our sin, but in the character of God, **'For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.'**

This description of God is drawn from the divine self-revelation given to Moses in the book of Exodus.

Exodus 34:6-7

⁶The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.

These words are repeated to serve as a powerful reminder that God's mercy is the ultimate motive behind repentance. We do not return to God because we are terrified of his wrath, but because we seek to return to living in relationship with him and we trust in his goodness, mercy and compassion.

The meaning of God's grace and mercy is often lost on modern audiences. Gracious, 'chanun', means the favor and complete goodwill of a superior party who cares for one who is inferior. Merciful, 'rachum' describes fatherly and motherly care, someone anxious to care for the life of one who is helpless and endangered. God's patience, 'erech apayim' is the long restraint of his anger and his steadfast love, 'rev chesed', is a wealth of voluntary kindness that creates community and keeps faith with His people.

God's mercy is the foundation of our hope. This means that the grace and mercy of God, if we truly understand it, and if we truly love God, will not embolden us to continue to live in sin, but demand in each of us a call to true repentance and a change in our hearts and lives.

The act of repentance is not something we can merely decide to do when we feel like it; it is a radical change wrought in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Joel's assurance that God, '**relents over disaster.**' Is not a promise that all of our sins and afflictions will be removed, but a promise that God's mercy is always available to those who humble themselves and turn to him.

'**Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him**' reminds us of the freedom of God to act according to His will not ours. We do not know what will happen, but we can place our hope and trust in the Lord knowing that He knows best. We are called to trust in God to show mercy and welcome home all those who repent and return to him with sincere hearts.

Joel 2:15-17

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;

consecrate a fast;

call a solemn assembly;

¹⁶gather the people.

Consecrate the congregation;

assemble the elders;

gather the children,

even nursing infants.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,

and the bride her chamber.

¹⁷ **Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep
and say, "Spare your people, O Lord,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?' "**

However, Joel's call to repentance moves beyond the individual to encompass the whole community. He commands, ¹⁵ **Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶ gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber.'**

This call to repentance is remarkable in its inclusiveness. No one is left out, not the elders, not the children, not even the newly married. The urgency of the call demands that all private joy gives way to public sorrow, that every segment of society participates in seeking God's mercy. The priests are told to weep between the porch and the altar, interceding for the people and pleading for God's compassion

Joel provides the priests with a prayer, **'Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'**

This prayer is both humble and bold, appealing to God's mercy and Glory. It acknowledges that God's people deserve judgment for their sinful ways, and it pleads for His compassion. The prayer reminds God that His people belong to Him, and that their fate reflects on His reputation among the nations.

This is what intercessory prayer should look like, a plea for mercy, not justice. Prayer that appeals to God's covenant relationship with his people and honors His name.

On Ash Wednesday and throughout Lent our prayers should not only be for our own personal forgiveness but also for the restoration of our community, our nation and the world, and the vindication of God's Glory to all.

So, heed Joel's call, embrace the sorrow of repentance and the hope of mercy. Turn to God with all your heart, to fast, weep and mourn – not as an empty ritual, but with heart that are filled with genuine repentance. Be reminded of God's mercy and steadfast love as we gather as the children of God and intercede in prayer for one another.

And remember that repentance is not a one time thing, but a continual change in the heart.

So no matter how far you have wandered from God's command, no matter how lost you may feel, listen to Joel's urge and hope full words, **"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.'**

God's invitation remains, repentance is never too late and God's mercy is always greater than our sin.

As we mark Ash Wednesday, let us return to the Lord with all our hearts, trusting in His grace and interceding for our community. The journey of Lent is a journey towards renewal, grounded in the mercy of God, and the promise of restoration. May this season be filled with sincere repentance, joyful hope and a deeper fellowship with God and one another as we walk as the Salt and Light of His Word in this community.

Let us Pray,
 O God,
 you do not desire the death of sinners,
 but you want them to turn to you and live.
 Look with pity on the weakness of our mortal nature.
 We confess that we are but ashes,
 and for our wickedness we deserve to return to the dust.
 Forgive all our sins,
 and give us the blessings that come with true repentance;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.
 Amen.

Source: Freely modified from Mozarabic Collects, ed. Rev. Chas. R. Hale, New York, 1881, p. 22 #1

Imposition of Ashes

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth. Grant that these ashes may be a sign of our mortality and penitence, so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift are we given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.
 Repent, and believe the gospel.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as we begin this holy season of Lent, let us commit ourselves to its spiritual disciplines. I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent:

- by self-examination and repentance,
- by prayer, fasting, and works of love,
- and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.

May God strengthen us to turn from sin and embrace the new life given in Jesus Christ. Let us walk together in humility, hope, and faith, trusting in God’s mercy and grace

Closing Hymn

Pastoral Prayer

Merciful and gracious God,

We thank you for gathering us in your presence at the beginning of this holy season. As we have confessed our sins and received the sign of ashes, remind us daily of our need for your grace and the hope we have in Christ. Strengthen us, O Lord, to walk in humility, to seek you with sincere hearts, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Grant us courage to turn from all that separates us from you, and to embrace the disciplines of Lent—prayer, fasting, generosity, and meditation on your Word. May your Holy Spirit guide us, comfort us in our weakness, and renew us in faith, hope, and love.

As we depart, help us to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return, but that in Jesus Christ we are made alive and new.

We ask all this in the name of Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer. **Amen.**

Benediction

Go forth into this Lenten season in the peace of Christ.

May the God of all grace, who calls you out of darkness into his marvelous light, strengthen, sustain, and uphold you.

May the blessing of God Almighty—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—be with you now and always.

Amen.