

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Joel, speaking to his people, declares to them,

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.¹

We have heard the prophecy of Joel, in which Joel brings the Word of the Lord God to the people. God has told Joel to get the people together, and for the people to get their act together, because God isn't especially pleased with them at the present time. In the book of Numbers, one finds a detailed list of the types of trumpet calls to be used to gather the elders, the leaders, the people, and so on. Here, God is telling Joel that He has an important message for the people, and Joel is to bring to the holy mountain all of the people so that God may address them.

Joel is calling the people together, and in the process, he is setting some expectations for their conduct. In particular, the people are called to set aside the normal activities of their lives as they prepare for this holy conversation. And we should expect that, since this isn't just some glorified congregational meeting, but a summons to appear, as an entire people, before the Lord God Almighty. This is serious business.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001.

And why is the alarm sounded? Because the day of the Lord is coming near, that's why. God is unhappy, and a time of judgment is at hand. The people have been acting against God's wishes, and now there is a time for accountability.

“But wait! We are the Lord's people, and no enemy can destroy us!” Sure, as long as the people remain faithful to the Lord. But let us not forget that unfaithfulness by the people was the explanation for defeat in the ancient days. God must be unhappy with His Chosen People if they lose in battle or are overrun by an enemy. When it comes to being either in or out of God's favor, there is no place to hide.

Joel reminds his people that just because they may fast or wail or mourn or do some other act to show their contrition, if it is not genuine—if the contrition is just a show in order to make the people feel good or to try and please God, no matter how good the act is, it will be unacceptable before God. Let me put it clearly, Joel said to the people—God doesn't like phonies.

Once all of the people are brought together, there is the common, heartfelt plea for God's mercy. “Don't be like those pagan gods, O Lord. Don't destroy us and allow others to point to you and say how mean and cruel you are. Show mercy on your people, and we will be faithful to you.” Of course, human beings are human beings, regardless of the century, and we all know that the Hebrew people wouldn't stay completely unified and faithful to God. Sin permeates our very being, and no matter how hard a human being tries, sin will also rear its ugly head.

So God took it upon Himself to show mercy on a people who didn't really deserve it. In order to stop His people from fretting about “doing enough” to make God happy—something that was *never* going to happen—God would eventually take matters into His own hands, become incarnate, live, teach, die, and rise from the grave in a final act of sacrifice for His people in order to assure that His people would always be righteous before Him.

As we begin this holy Lent, we are called upon to gather the elders, to bring together the people of all ages, and to stop focusing on our own wants and

desires, and instead turn our attention to God's desires for us. As we mark a holy Lent, we should take time to reflect on the gifts which God has given to us—our time, talent, and treasures, yes, but also the very gift of grace which comes through the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are called to stop making everything all about us and what we want, and focus on what God is calling us to do, and whom God is calling to do these things in order to further the Kingdom of God in this time and place, even as we prepare for that time unknown when Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead.

As we move forward as a congregation of the gathered people of God, we should do so with one—and only one—mission. We are called, gathered, and sent into the world for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Nothing else matters, it is as simple as that. We are called to make disciples, proclaim the Good News to the world, care for the poor, lift up the sick, tend to the children and other innocents, and be messengers of God's Word in a world that is not always ready to hear it.

So then, my dear brothers and sisters, take time in these next forty days to pray, reflect, contemplate, confess, and otherwise prepare yourselves to hear what God has to say for you. Take time to sit in silence and actually listen for God to answer your prayers, rather than storming off on another spiel of requests for His performance. Be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in your lives, and be ready to hear a message that you might not want or expect to hear.

Be ready and open, my friends, because it is not about us, but about God. Amen.