

Rev. Dearthrice DeWitt
“Rent Hearts Are Louder than Trumpets”
Christ Episcopal Church, Ash Wednesday ♦ 2/21/07

*When they excavate me as ruins,
Thousands of years from now,
Will they wonder what I was doing,
Who I was and what my life was about*

*When my riches lie in ruins,
On a land that scales my past,
Will they uncover I was pursuing
Things in life that really last?*

*Where your treasure is
The things you love,
All a part of you and me
Will be your heart...¹*

We don't really mourn as a nation when times of trouble seem to head our way, do we? Sure, we mourn when important political figures die, or when a tragedy like September 11th strikes our consciousness, but we don't mourn for troubling times on the horizon. In the Prophet Joel's vision, Israel's troubles during stable times seems to come out of nowhere!

¹ From the song “Excavate,” by Wes King.

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Joel was written during prosperous times for Israel too – making Joel’s prophecy even *more* puzzling. 7,000 years ago Israel was a united kingdom, Jerusalem had a strong wall around itself, the priesthood was strong, and slavery boosted the economy. On the surface of things, nothing seemed wrong with this great kingdom, ruled by the Lord of Hosts.

But something *was* wrong! It had to be if Joel portended God *outside* the walled city on the verge of breaking in. God is likened to silent swarms of locusts! The images must have startled the people as they went through their daily lives. It must have rattled them from the comfort and security of their national strength. There’s doom and gloom, literally – God’s presence descends upon Israel just when they *thought* they were righteous and favored as Chosen People. God comes through with the devastating power of a locust swarm, so much so that Joel says the land has become “a desolate wilderness.” Nothing escapes God’s harsh judgment.

What then is the problem? How could Israel be so secure and unsettled to its core? Just because they built a tall, sturdy wall around their sacred city doesn’t mean those walls can withstand every enemy – *especially* the enemy within. Walls are tragically ironic.

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We build them often only to find that we trapped ourselves. Our world becomes insular, closed and cut off, myopic and suffocating.

Israel was choking on its own walled-in hubris. One temptation of godless national security is a slip into laziness. Israel neglected to care for its people’s basic needs. Being God’s Chosen Ones only exacerbated that temptation! Chosen-ness and Manifest Destiny, in any time, gives no guarantee of faithfulness. Whether it’s the Israelites or us, we can be doing all the right things and still miss the mark of faithfulness.

So what does Israel do? Israel blew its trumpet – a *shofar* – a common symbol to all people that the nation was in deep, dire trouble. A sign that they had lost their way to God.

Is that what we should do? Do we sound the trumpet as the prophet Joel demands? As we gather for ashes and Communion, do we have any sense that we Americans are in trouble?

Does a trumpet need to resound in Poughkeepsie? Does a trumpet need to sound in our own hearts?

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Are we here tonight because we know, deep down, we’re in trouble?

I can’t answer that for you; we each must venture the recesses of our hearts.

Thanks be to God, we don’t have to venture alone – Jesus Christ gives us light to find our way. God’s word is calling us to make two changes in our Christian walk, sisters and brothers. Two changes whose divine mandate for repentance comes from the same place. Remember the words I read at the beginning? They are by an artist named Wes King. I think of his lyrics often. He is asking a simple question. What kind of legacy do you want to leave on this earth? What do you want your lasting, loving touch to be for the human race?

If any of you doubt you will touch lives during the course of your life, let me assure you that when you breathe your last breath, someone’s heart will break from missing you. If you’ve come here thinking you’re a nobody, know that God loves you so much that She is urging, pleading, yes even demanding that you turn yourself back to her love.

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You see, sin is – at its root – a lie. Israel began believing one of those lies. They built walls. Then they used religion to create the spiritual elitism Jesus despised. Israel did all of this because they looked out into the randomly violent world and felt alone. It must have been painful to wall themselves off from God!

Just as God gives never-ending grace and mercy to Israel to turn away from their self-imposed lies, so too are we given those graces. The same Spirit of 7,000 years ago is here for us today!

It is beckoning us like a mother,
wooing us like a lover,
goadng us like a true friend.

But we have to decide what treasure we want.

Jesus seems to contradict Joel. Don't sound a trumpet, Jesus says. Don't pray aloud before others he says. Don't let others know how hard fasting is for you, Jesus warns. Is he saying don't mourn when we know we're in trouble? Not at all.

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The Lord is saying to us the same thing as Joel, but another way! We must work toward purity and spiritual holiness in our relationships with each other and God, but not to stroke our egos or win favor with peers. God is the only One whose favor we should seek.

The point of our piety, whatever it may be, isn't to suffer or punish ourselves. Masochism and piety don't mix! We seek out God to be strengthened for the journey of faith.

We give what we give because it comes from rended hearts. We give of ourselves because we see the brokenness in our lives, and in others. We give from the heart because rent hearts register a sound that awakens our world to its troubles.

We pray because our actions need to be blessed by God's power to sustain them. We pray because we cannot soften hardheartedness from our leaders when their agendas only build more suffocating walls. We pray because the Holy Spirit fears no wall.

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We fast, we enter into this solemn time because, in whatever we do in God’s name, we must remember our very lifestyles are often a part of the troubling sin. Homeless cities and NIMBY suburbs. Unrestrained development and underdeveloped young Black minds. A city unsafe for children to walk home from school. A city where former felons *have* no home.

Something’s not right. Our walls are too high. We’re choking. So it’s time to mourn. It’s time to do as Wes King says;

So live in light of the future
Learn from yesterday
Cause what we do now will echo forever
We are only promised today.

It’s like we’re waiting for something. Paralysis has gripped us, from the church to the street, and we don’t know what to do. Fear shuts our mouths when we know we should speak and be heard. But God is with us in these great and terrible days. God is with us, even when we keep the Holy One outside the gates. God is Spirit, and our walls have no hope. God is here, and it’s time for the walls to come down.

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Walls in our hearts that refuse to rend.

Walls in our souls we know we need to tend.

Walls in our common life where love can't cast out the fear.

Walls just because we've believed the lie that God isn't near.

The new day, the more authentic treasure always available to us – it begins with us. If God is with us, there's nothing left to wait for. If we know we're in trouble, let us flee to God's mercy. *Cling* to it, let it light our way out of this darkness we've made. Watch how it changes us into the fulfillment of Christ's promises. He promised to come among us again and I tell you that he *is* here, risen and with power – in you and in me! Locusts may come and walls may go, but it is the Holy One through Christ Jesus that remains our strength forever. Christ is our inexhaustible treasure, even in the greatest troubles.

*Should you dig for the Son of Heaven,
Some holy grail you'll hope to exhume,
All that's left are the people that love him,
The greatest treasure is an empty tomb!*

Live in this good news. Rend your hearts – our world will never be the same again if you do! Amen.