

Ash Wednesday - 2010
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

This will be a February to remember for a long time! The record snowfall we've had has really messed up our routines! Of course, snow will almost always mess things up around here, but this time the snow significantly messed up the routine of our:

- A) personal lives ... most of us lost power, some for days on end ...
- B) work and our schools ... last week, as the Tuesday Night Youth Group on Wednesday met on Thursday, there was some concern that the County might take away some or all of Spring break because of the number of school days that have been lost ...
- C) church life together ... we couldn't even gather for worship two weekends ago, the annual meeting and Youth Sunday had to be postponed, and we essentially lost a crucial week of preparation for Lent ...!

And so over these past few days, as I was doing my part to prepare for our Lenten activities, I thought about how much more difficult it is to really be ready for this important season of the church year when our routines are still so messed up. I worried about all the people who might not be able to take part in activities they had been looking forward to because they have to compensate for their routines being messed up. And I kept having this thought in the back of my mind, "wouldn't it be nice if we could wait to start Lent until our routines were back to normal?"

But then, I started to think about our readings for tonight. And it occurred to me as I read them, that in many ways, Lent is a time when God intentionally wants to mess up our routines! In most of our readings, God calls people to get out of the routines that they've become accustomed to. And it's often through messing up their routines that God is able to bring about change.

Sometimes, people get so comfortable in their routines that the only way God can bring about any positive change is to prod them out of their routines. That's precisely what's happening when:

A) the prophet Joel tells people to “rend your hearts and not your clothing”
... The problem is that they’re stuck in an old routine that isn’t
working anymore ...

B) Jesus tells people to fast and pray and give alms according to an entirely
different routine than the ones they’ve been accustomed to seeing ...

And actually, when you get forced out of your routine, sometimes you discover
some important things. In these past few days, for example, because our routines
have been so disrupted by the snow, many of us have:

A) realized again the importance of things we so often take for granted ...
(for all the things “we can’t live without”, when the power goes off in
the middle of the winter and we need to keep ourselves and our
families warm, we profoundly appreciate things we so often just
assume are always there ...)

B) had to prioritize the things which really are important, because when our
routines are messed up, we don’t have the luxury of trying to squeeze
the trivial, or even “somewhat important” things into our schedules ...
(I’ve been constantly asking myself, “is this mission critical” over the
past few days ...)

C) learned to do things in some different ways, because we’ve had to ...
(although imperfect, we learned this week that we can have a Council
meeting by conference call, and I started to think in a whole new way
about the importance of home devotional material on our website for
people who can’t get to church ...)

That’s often the way it goes for us when our routines get messed up. And I think
that’s why we so often hear God’s call to get out of the comfort of our routines.
For it’s when God calls us or prods us, or even drags us out of our routines that we
can come to a better and deeper appreciation of:

A) the importance of God’s blessings that we so often take for granted ...
(that’s really why we do things like fasting ...)

B) the things that really matter, and that are indeed “mission critical” to our
lives of faith ... (at the heart of the Wednesday evening classes that

we'll have this year, "your money or your life" is the deep question, "on what are you spending yourself? And is it worth it?"

C) the ways that we can grow and change and do things differently ... as I considered the availability of the technology that just wasn't available to us 10 years ago, it made me realize that there are a lot of other opportunities that God has given us to connect and grow as a community. And we can't simply do things like we did them 10 years ago. For while God may be calling us to do the same things we did 10 years ago, there are perhaps new and better ways to do them...

So in spite of the fact that being out of my routine as Lent begins makes me crazy, being dragged out of my routine may be precisely where God wants me to be. It may be just where God wants all of us to be. For it's when we're out of our routines that we can more fully appreciate all that God gives us that we so often take for granted. It's when we're out of our routines that we're forced to figure out what's really important. And it's when we're out of our routines that we're most likely to be in a place where God can guide and lead us into new ways of living and growing as God's people.

Amen.