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INTRODUCTION

*"Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with your whole heart,
with fasting, and weeping, and mourning;*

*Rend your hearts,
not your garments,
and return to the Lord, your God.
For gracious and merciful is he,
slow to anger,
rich in kindness,
and relenting in punishment.*

Joel 2:12-13

The moment has come! The time is *now*. There is no sense in waiting, no benefit in delaying, no use in putting it off. Regardless of the mistakes of our past, despite the desperation of our current circumstance, the hour has come. No matter how distant our spirit, how hardened our heart, how painful our situation, or even how wayward our path has become – “even now” the Lord our God calls each one of us.

Perhaps you feel like you’re not entirely lost. Maybe your path is not so crooked or wayward. You may not be experiencing undue hardship or pain. On the surface, your life could not be more peaceful, balanced, in control. Yet in those moments of quiet reflection, you know that all is not well within. You wonder why your heart is not entirely at rest. You realize that the promises of the world do not satisfy the deeper hunger you have rumbling in your core. For you too, the time has come. “Even now” the Lord is calling you.

God’s call is straightforward and simple: “Return to me with your whole heart.” He wants you back. He yearns for you as a father for a lost child. He waits for you like a watchman longing for the dawn of light. He is asking you to stop what you are doing and take the time to reexamine your life. “Why am I striving so hard? What am I searching for? How can I find true life, purpose and fulfillment?”

Joel 2:13

*“Return to the Lord,
your God.
For gracious
and merciful is he.”*

Through the prophet Joel, the Lord addresses those questions and leads us toward the true object of our longing. God calls us to none other than himself. He is our answer. He is the beginning and the end, the font and foundation, the only One who can satisfy the deepest longing of the human heart. The time is now. “Return to the Lord.”

"return to me with your whole heart"

In many ways, this prophetic call of Joel is a beautiful foretaste of the singular event from which our entire lives as Christians are born – the full glory of God coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The passionate exhortation of the prophet is later reiterated and given superseding grandeur in Mark's account at the dawning of Jesus' earthly ministry:

*"This is the time
of fulfillment.*

The kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Mark 1:15

"This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). Many biblical scholars assert that the whole gospel, the entire message of God

manifest in the coming of Jesus the Christ, is expressed in this single passage of Sacred Scripture. In this solitary verse is contained the quintessential core of Christianity and the key to understanding our lives in light of Jesus, the Incarnate Word. After his baptism and temptation in the desert and before calling his disciples to carry out the ongoing mission of the Father, Jesus proclaimed those ineffable words, "This is the time. . . The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Much could be said of this single verse, but several points are particularly important. Ancient voices had, through the centuries, heralded the future coming of the Messiah, the chosen one who would liberate the children of Israel from their enemies and bring judgment to their oppressors. These prophets trumpeted the Lord's promises to comfort his people, deliver them from their sins and beckon them into everlasting life. What is particularly significant about Jesus' words at the beginning of Mark is that the future tense of the prophets' messages has been converted into the present tense. It is no longer a matter of waiting. Jesus tells us to wait no further. "This is the time of fulfillment," he said. "The kingdom of God is at hand."

This, of course, is an incredible statement. In a way never before encountered, in a completely new and unprecedented fashion, the kingdom of God had broken into the physical world. In the very person of Jesus of Nazareth, the fullness of God became present, tangible, and accessible to the human family who was created to receive and celebrate this glorious gift. We have no reason to wait, no excuse to delay, for the time is now, the Lord our God is here.

The wonder of Emmanuel, “God-with-us”, is illustrated throughout the entire life of Jesus. It was proclaimed by the angel Gabriel to Mary, the Virgin Mother of God in the Annunciation – “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!” (Lk 1:28). It shines forth in the splendor of the Incarnation as God came into the world in human form to reveal the love of the Father

– “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:5).

It washes through the scene at the river Jordan when Jesus was baptized by John, and the Father said, “This

is my beloved Son” (Mt 3:17). It was heralded in the reading from the scroll in the synagogue, following the words of the prophet Isaiah - “Today this scripture is fulfilled” (Lk 4:21). Even in the most unlikely places and most painful circumstances, Jesus proclaims these same words to us. Though he suffered an agonizing death on the cross, not even that could separate him from the world he came to save. As he hung on the cross, even in his final moments, he said to the thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” (Jn 19:30). Over and over again, throughout the life of Jesus, we hear the same message – God is truly with us; the kingdom of God is at hand.

*“The same Spirit who brings sin to light
is also the Consoler
who gives the human heart grace
for repentance and conversion.”*

CCC 1433

"return to me with your whole heart"

The power and splendor of this realization is breath-taking. As this truth dawns on the human consciousness, we are overwhelmed by the grace of a God who appears in our midst. We are besieged by the compassion of a God who chooses to embrace us in all of our weakness, sickness, depravity and sin. Much more, we are humbled by the mercy of a God who would take that sin upon himself for our salvation. If this is true, if the Lord has come, if the kingdom of God is at hand, then there is only one natural response – “Repent and believe in the gospel.” If we are standing in the presence of God, the One who breathed life into our lungs and holds the promise of our future, then it is only natural that we turn away from our fallenness and embrace the source of our healing and redemption. Acknowledging our condition in the light of God’s love and forgiveness, we can begin once again the perennial journey that leads to wholeness, holiness and peace.

*"There are two conversions
in the Church:
the water of Baptism and
the tears of repentance."*

-St. Ambrose

This is the reason that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is especially emphasized during this holy season. Through the sacrament we truly do turn away from our fallenness and embrace

our healing and redemption. Our confession brings us face to face with our brokenness and sin. Yet the priest’s absolution brings us face to face with the forgiveness and mercy of Jesus as we hear him, Christ himself, forgive and bless us. Our sanctifying grace—“the indwelling of the Holy Spirit”—is restored or increased, bringing about that inner transformation which flows to outward charity. Such reconciling and renewing encounters with the risen Lord capture the essence of the Lenten journey.

In fact, all of the Church’s energies are focused on bringing about and experiencing this forgiveness and conversion of heart. The daily readings offered at Mass all converge to proclaim a common message of conversion. The traditional Lenten practices that Christians are exhorted

to take up—fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, are all meant to be expressions of and means to conversion of heart. The communal fasts of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday draw the Church together as one in a sign of repentance and conversion to God. Through the Church’s guidance and wisdom, we, the Church, rend our hearts and return to the Lord.

The time is now. There is nothing to fear. Often we get the erroneous impression that God wants to punish and belittle us for our tendency to wander from him. Sometimes we think of God as a heavenly scorekeeper, tallying our mistakes and weighing them against our merits. We might get the impression that Lent is a time for us to be chastised, or at least suffer in our guilt. Yet the message is clear. The Lord our God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and rich in kindness” (Jl 2:13). We are not simply to give up chocolate or caffeine. We are not merely to perform outward signs and ritual actions. We are called to manifest outwardly what is being transformed inwardly. The Lord’s words through the prophet Joel remind us that we are called to “rend our hearts, not our garments.”

We are called to seek God in truth and “return to the Lord with our whole heart.” What the Lord desires is a genuine



recommitment of the heart. Without a sincere turn of the will, outward formalities are fruitless. There is only one suitable response to the inbreaking reality of the kingdom of God, only one option for us as we’re confronted by the living presence of Christ in our midst - a sincere change of heart, an interior turn to the Lord and an openness to him and his power in the sacraments, and in prayer, to radically transform us into the disciples he has called us be.

“return to me with your whole heart”

That is what Lent is all about. Symbolized in baptism and in the annual recommitment of our baptismal vows, Lent is a time when we can die to the tyranny of self and all that checks our progress on the spiritual journey, all that undermines and inhibits full communion with our loving Father. It is a time when we can reclaim the grace of our baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at confirmation. It is a time when we can “return to the Lord with your whole heart” (Jl 2:12), a time when we own up to our weaknesses, our failures, our sins and express our sorrow for the way that we’ve wounded ourselves and others. And in the unmerited love of the Father comes a newness of life, an elevation of spirit, a transformation of heart that reflects the all-encompassing invitation to experience the mystery of God.

“This is the time of fulfillment,” Jesus said. “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). Through this Lenten series we invite you to journey together, as one body of Christ, and respond to the grace-filled invitation of God in this season. This lectionary-based Lenten study draws from the Church’s liturgical readings (Cycle A) so as to sow the seeds of conversion that can be expressed and celebrated with renewed energy at Sunday Masses throughout Lent. We pray, with the Church, that the liturgy of the Word might penetrate your heart in a new way this year, bearing fruit that will endure forever in the kingdom of God. The time is now. Return to the Lord with all your heart and experience the joy of rebirth in Christ.





Lenten Prayer

Father,

I abandon myself into Your hands,

Do with me what You will.

For whatever You may do, I thank you.

I am ready for all,

I accept all,

Let only Your will be done in me.

*Charles de Foucauld,
Little Brother of Jesus (1858-1916)*