

*Rend Your Heart: An Ash Wednesday Meditation**

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

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Picture a quiet country road on a summer's evening. A gravel road. Up ahead there's a railroad crossing with a silent signal. No bells or flashers. The tracks emerge from a knoll on the right. You can see a semaphore block signal in the distance. The rails pass the crossing, curve to the left, and disappear out of sight, heading down a gentle slope. The year might have been 1944. Into this peaceful scene comes an automobile which stops about fifty yards from the crossing. Out of the car climbs a young man holding an infant. And there's a little boy. They've come to watch the 6:15 arrive from Detroit.

You have the impression that they've been here before. The little boy spots a bulldozer working a grade near the tracks and asks his dad if he can take a closer look. With hesitation, the father says, "OK, but don't be long." We watch the boy lope across the field to where the machine is working. And, because it seems to be the safest vantage point, he steps up on the tracks to watch.

II

Suddenly, the tranquility is broken when the father hears an unexpected whistle in the distance. In an instant, his heart is filled with fear. Another train—an earlier freight—is roaring toward the crossing ahead of the 6:15. It's headed straight for where the little boy is standing on the tracks. He begins to call the boy's name. He yells a warning to turn and look. But the boy can't hear because of the bulldozer. The father begins to run across the field, carrying the baby in his arms. By now he can see the train, and terror pours through his entire body. He sees that he will never reach the boy in time. Yet, he keeps on running, calling, running. But the boy doesn't hear. The father begins to envision the horror which is about to come.

III

The voice we hear tonight is a cry of warning. It's the voice of the Prophet Joel, calling to his people. To the old, the young, the drunk, the sober. Even those who are lost in honeymoon bliss.

Calling anyone who will hear to look up, to listen, and to see the great calamity which is about to befall. It's just outside the door—open and it'll stare you in the face! It's just around the corner—take a step and it will swallow you alive! Can anyone hear? Will anyone open their eyes?

A great and terrible day is descending upon God's unfaithful people. A day which will do to Zion what a roaring locomotive would do to a child. "This is what's happening," cries the voice. We must respond! Immediately! There's still time to return to the Lord. To be spared from calamity. "Yet even now," says the Lord, "return

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to me with all your heart. Rend your heart and not your garments!”

IV

It’s never been easy to go deeply into the heart. The heart can be a frightening place. I think you know what I mean. There are too many shadows. Too many fears. Too many mixed motives. Too many guilts and sorrows which are difficult to bear. Going deeply into the heart is like going into the attic of Mike Christy’s garage. All the kids said it was haunted. It was the most scary place of my childhood! We talked about it a lot, but, to my knowledge, nobody climbed up to take a look.

I suppose this is why Lent is such an ambivalent season. Because it’s a time for rending the heart. A time for probing those inner places which are dark and scary. Lent is the time when we go into Mike Christy’s garage attic and stay for a while. Given our culture’s obsession with comfort, it’s something which most of us don’t want to do. Yet, in the distance, the prophetic voice calls, warns, and calls again. Stop! Listen! Open your eyes! See how late it is! There’s still time to return to the Lord. With your broken heart; your troubled heart; your checkered heart; your *whole* heart. For, the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

V

Well, you’ll be happy to know that the scene at the railroad crossing didn’t end with tragedy. When the father saw that he couldn’t reach his son, he froze. But, at that very moment, the boy turned, saw the locomotive bearing down on him, and calmly stepped off the tracks to watch the train go by.

VI

My father is gone now, but there was always terror in his voice when he recounted the story. He remembered how his knees were weak for hours. And how it took a week before he could tell my mother. I never knew the danger, even when I turned and saw the locomotive. But *he* knew the calamity which narrowly missed his family. And *he* knew the grace—the unexpected grace—which had rescued the moment. Shaking, sweating, he could only say, “Thank you, God. Thank you!”

So it is with those who hear the voice, who respond and return to the Lord. The voice of warning is not a voice of doom. It’s a voice of promise and assurance. Beyond all our journeys into the shadows of the heart, there awaits a God of infinite love and mercy. A God who seeks us in our confusion, calls us to return, and holds us securely. Even as a parent holds a child when danger approaches.

VII

Nowhere else but in the biblical story could we hear a voice which warns of disaster, demands repentance, and yet promises grace. Yet, such is the passionate voice which we hear. Calling us to rend our hearts, renew our lives, and walk in the way of the Lord during this journey called Lent.