



## ASH WEDNESDAY

**FIRST READING: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**

**OR Isaiah 58:1-12, following**

A reading from Joel.

<sup>1</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
    for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—  
<sup>2</sup>a day of darkness and gloom,  
    a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains,  
    a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
    nor will be again after them  
    in ages to come.

<sup>12</sup>Yet even now, says the LORD,  
    return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
    <sup>13</sup>rend your hearts and not your clothing.

Return to the LORD your God,  
    for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,  
    and relenting from punishment.

<sup>14</sup>Who knows whether he will not turn and relent  
    and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain offering and a drink offering  
    for the LORD your God?

<sup>15</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    consecrate a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;  
    <sup>16</sup>gather the people.

Consecrate the congregation;  
    assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
    even infants at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room  
    and the bride her canopy. ▶

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### FIRST READING (Joel)

The darkness and invasion images are a reference to “the day of the locust”—a plague of locusts cited in chapter 1. This threat is immediate and extraordinary, and the tone of the reading is ominous. It is a poetic text. It demands a deliberate reading. Pay particular attention to the paragraph divisions (and pause when you come to them) because they often mark a change to a new voice—that of the prophet or that of the LORD—or the introduction of a new idea.

<sup>17</sup>Between the vestibule and the altar,  
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.  
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,  
and do not make your heritage a mockery,  
a byword among the nations.  
Why should it be said among the peoples,  
'Where is their God?'"

Word of God, word of life.            *or*            The word of the Lord.

**OR: Isaiah 58:1-12**

A reading from Isaiah.

<sup>1</sup>Shout out; do not hold back!  
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!  
Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.  
<sup>2</sup>Yet day after day they seek me  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgments;  
they want God on their side.  
  
<sup>3</sup>"Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"  
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day  
and oppress all your workers.  
<sup>4</sup>You fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.  
<sup>5</sup>Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?

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**FIRST READING (Isaiah)**    *Isaiah = eye-ZAY-uh*

The voice in verses 1-5 is that of an angry God—even a bitingly sarcastic God. That tone abruptly shifts at verse 6 to one of impassioned instruction. The text's images are rich and varied. Help the assembly hear each and every one by reading slowly (even half as fast as you are initially inclined) and enunciating carefully.

<sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
<sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
<sup>8</sup>Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you;  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
<sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
<sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
<sup>11</sup>The LORD will guide you continually  
and satisfy your needs in parched places  
and make your bones strong,  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water  
whose waters never fail.  
<sup>12</sup>Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.

Word of God, word of life.      *or*      The word of the Lord.

**PSALMODY: Psalm 51:1-17**

## SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

A reading from Second Corinthians.

<sup>20b</sup>We entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God.

<sup>21</sup>For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

<sup>6:1</sup>As we work together with him, we entreat you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

<sup>2</sup>For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Look, now is the acceptable time;  
look, now is the day of salvation!

<sup>3</sup>We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,

<sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: in great endurance,

afflictions, hardships, calamities,

<sup>5</sup>beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;

<sup>6</sup>in purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love,

<sup>7</sup>truthful speech, and the power of God;

with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;

<sup>8</sup>in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute.

We are treated as impostors and yet are true,

<sup>9</sup>as unknown and yet are well known,

as dying and look—we are alive,

as punished and yet not killed,

<sup>10</sup>as sorrowful yet always rejoicing,

as poor yet making many rich,

as having nothing and yet possessing everything.

Word of God, word of life.

or

The word of the Lord.

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### SECOND READING

The author urges the reader (and readers will urge hearers) to be imitators of the apostles as servants of God who have lived commendably. *Entreat* means the issue is urgent, and the reading ought to sound like it. “Now is the acceptable time” for this kind of living. It is for this kind of life that we have accepted the grace of God.

## GOSPEL: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The holy gospel according to Matthew.

「Jesus said to the disciples:」

<sup>1</sup>“Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

<sup>2</sup>“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

<sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

<sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>16</sup>“And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

<sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

<sup>18</sup>so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ▶

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**GOSPEL** *hypocrites = HIP-uh-crits* *synagogues = SIN uh-gogz*

Explore the natural rhythm of the text generated by the three repeated phrases: “whenever,” “truly I tell you,” and “but when.” From the outset the reading is about “where your heart is.” (Caution: Overly emphasizing the repeated pronoun “you” throughout the reading will diminish the impact of the instructive verbs that follow.) Allow all four illustrations—almsgiving, prayer, fasting, and worldly goods—to lead the hearer to the powerful conclusion of verse 21. A pause before that crucial verse might be just the thing to help the assembly hear it most clearly.

<sup>19</sup>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,  
where moth and rust consume  
and where thieves break in and steal,  
<sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,  
where neither moth nor rust consumes  
and where thieves do not break in and steal.  
<sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The gospel of the Lord.