

“Returning”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

3-6-19 Ash Wednesday

Based upon Joel 2:12-17

In the hit movie, “*The Notebook*,”¹ based upon the Nicholas Spark’s book by the same name, a husband, played by James Garner, reads a love story to his wife, played by Gena Rowlands, who is in a nursing home. She doesn’t know that the story is her own, however, because she has dementia. Day after day the husband reads to her, and day after day she listens without realizing that he is recounting the highs and lows and adventures of their life together. Then finally, for a few fleeting moments near the end of the movie, the synapses in her brain fire well enough for her to recognize something familiar in his words. Like a person returning from a great distance, she looks at her husband with different eyes. She recognizes him, and asks about their kids and life. She is “back.” But her return lasts only a few minutes. It isn’t long before she is gone again, lost somewhere in a cloud of confusion. For many of us here who have experienced personally what it’s like to lose a loved one to dementia long before that loved one actually dies, the husband’s yearning for his beloved to return is all too familiar. “Come back to me,” we, too, have prayed. “Come back to your senses. Don’t go.”

But imagine if God were the husband and you the wife? Do you ever think of yourself as being “gone?” Probably not. It’s much more a part of human nature to think of God being gone than ourselves. “Where is God?” we ask when life gets difficult. “Where is God?” we ask when our dreams don’t come true. We are quick to believe that God has left the building or really doesn’t care whenever anything goes wrong or is challenging. But in the Bible, the number one reason that things go wrong or are challenging is that human beings have left God, not the other way around. We suffer from a sort of spiritual dementia caused by our pride, which causes us to forget who God is, who we are, and what our lives are supposed to look like, and because we forget these critical truths, we do all kinds of things that we wouldn’t do if we remembered. We make choices that hurt us and others. We reject God’s way in favor of all kinds of lesser ways which at best are inadequate, and at worst toxic. The theological name for this great sin of forgetting God and our relationship with God, which leads to almost all the other sins, is apostasy; it’s a sin, not a condition, because ultimately, we do not have dementia. There is no physiological excuse for our forgetting. We just do.

Recognizing this, the two words which the prophets spoke probably more than any others were “Remember” and “Return.” “Remember,” so that we can recognize who and whose we are, and “return” so that we can be with the one who has the power and desire to give us abundant life. “Return to the Lord,” Joel cries in tonight’s text. “For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” These words mark the literal turning point in this book, which begins with a chapter and a half of terror, first in the form of an invasion of locusts and then an apocalyptic vision of a military army doing even worse damage, and which ends with a chapter and a half of how God wants to show mercy in new and surprising ways if only the

¹ Leven, Jeremy, *The Notebook*, film, (based upon 1996 book by Nicolas Sparks), directed by Nick Cassavetes, (Gran Via, 2004.)

Israelites would return. The people are facing catastrophe brought on partly by circumstances outside of their control and partly by their sins. Their only real hope is to return to their Lord, who alone has the power to make the vision disappear like a nightmare interrupted by the dawn.

Lent is a time which Christians have long set aside for remembering and returning. Although our eyes are on Christ at Christmastime, by now, many of us, maybe most of us, are distracted by other things. We are starting to forget, or have done so already focusing on our own plans and priorities. Therefore, before we can possibly celebrate the good news of Easter, we need to refocus our minds and hearts on God's plans and priorities instead. "Rend your hearts, not your clothing," Joel advised. In other words, don't just put on a show of repentance. Commit your full self to returning and staying with God, all the way to Jerusalem and beyond.

His words may make you wonder what it is then that we are doing here, putting the ashes of repentance on our foreheads for everyone to see. Isn't that just a show, a visible, yet ultimately meaningless ritual, given that most of us will leave this place and within a couple of hours wash the crosses off our faces? It can be, I'm sorry to say. But it doesn't have to be, and isn't supposed to be. The ashes are meant to bring us "back to ourselves" because as a mark of repentance they carry in their dust the prophets' message, "Return." As one wise but anonymous preacher put it, "the sign of the cross on our foreheads is like the luggage tag that enables a lost bag to be returned. The ashes point the way home."² I love that image because it takes out of the concept of repentance all the stuff that makes our prideful hearts bristle, the "O God, I am but a worm"-stuff, as well as all the stuff that we aren't good at admitting: "O God, I need your help for I am lost." The luggage tag metaphor replaces these things with an image of being found, and beloved, and saved. God is our home in this life and the next. God is our love. We belong in God's arms because we are God's and always will be.

Now the ashes aren't magical, in the sense that once they touch our foreheads we will always remember and instantly become the people God made us to be. But they can open our eyes and hearts long enough to get us to turn around and head in the right direction again, and once we are returning instead of running away, once we are remembering instead of forgetting, something unexpected happens. Not only does it become easier for us to see the ways that we have sinned, it also becomes a joy, not a burden or source of embarrassment, to confess those ways because we realize that we are gazing in the eyes of the one who can actually help us. "O God, there you are. I've been trying to go it alone again. Forgive me and help me to listen better." "O God, I've been so focused on achieving X or obtaining Y, help me to find my security and value in you." "O God, I don't know what to do with my anger, fear, impatience, doubt, despair. Can you remove these feelings from my heart?" When our back isn't facing God, our defenses go down, and we are better able to receive the transforming grace and mercy that can make us whole.

² *Animating Illustrations*, "Repentance", Homileticonline.com, retrieved March 4, 2019 from http://www.homileticonline.com/subscribers/illustration_search.asp:repentance.

Tonight, we are going to have an opportunity to do both returning and repenting. In a few moments you will be invited to receive the ashes, which symbolize not just that we are dust and to dust we shall return, but also that we are God's, and to God we must return. Whatever plagues of locust torment you inside or out, know that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and eager for you to return for however long you can remember to do so. Then after you have received your ashes, you are invited to proceed to our temporary "chalkboard" cross. Take a piece of chalk and write on it a word or two about those aspects of yourself that you would like to be rid of with God's help. Think about what has made you forget about God. Think about your problems and pains. You don't need to identify yourself when you write, like "Help me not to be so judgmental God, love Bob." Just put a word or two about what you know doesn't belong in your life or is distracting you from who God made you to be: anger, selfishness, fear, greed, pride. What would you have crucified in you or the world instead of Christ? Then return to your seat. At Easter we will see how God receives us, when we return and repent in faith.

The Bible is the greatest love story ever told, better than anything Nicholas Sparks or the like could dream up. It is a story of our God, who refuses to give up on humankind even though we forget and betray God constantly. Never forget that that story is your story. God yearns to be known and recognized; God yearns to save us and show us the way into better living. It is we who have been gone, not God. Remember, return, and repent, not just tonight, but every night. The Lord is our home, our help, and our hope. Thanks be to God!