

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

March 2, 2022 – ASH WEDNESDAY (YR. C)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Now is the Time!*”

Joel 2:1-2,12-17	(Call a solemn assembly; return to the Lord)
Psalms 103:1-14	(Bless the Lord who heals and forgives us)
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10	(Now is the day of salvation!)
St. Matthew 6:1-6,16-21	(Give charitably, pray, and fast—get closer to God)

In his homily for Lent 2017, Pope Francis said: “Lent is a new beginning, a path leading to the certain goal of Easter, Christ’s victory over death. This season urgently calls us to conversion. Christians are asked to return to God ‘with all their hearts’ (Joel 2:12), to refuse to settle for mediocrity and to grow in friendship with the Lord. Jesus is the faithful friend who never abandons us. Even when we sin, he patiently awaits our return; by that patient expectation, he shows us his readiness to forgive.”¹

The message of our Scripture lessons for this evening is basically, “no matter what the past has been, now is the time to turn back to God. And this return must be real, not merely an outward show.” Every Ash Wednesday, the voice of the Prophet Joel ushers us into the season of Lent with a much-needed message of hope that begins with the powerful words: “Yet, even *now*.”

He continues: “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” In other words, if you are alive today and are able to read or listen to this message, it means the Lord has given you another chance. A free pass. No strings attached. Just come! It’s not too late to return to Him with all your heart.

In our Epistle reading, we hear St. Paul repeating the same message: “See, *now* is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!”² It’s been said that procrastination is the thief of time. Or, as the late Gloria Pitzer, an author of cookbooks, once quipped: “Procrastination is my sin. It brings me naught but sorrow. I know that I should stop it. In fact, I will ... tomorrow!”³

We might be able to get away with putting things off at work or home, but as Christians we should not keep until tomorrow whatever good we can do today, for none of us knows which day will be our last on earth. Fr. John Wesley famously said: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”⁴

The fact that none of us is aware of our own expiration date is what is symbolized by the ashes we receive tonight. “Remember that thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return.”

These ashes—which are made from the incinerated palms of Palm Sunday—are not just holy decorations, or some sort of good luck charm. They remind us of the urgency of repentance, of our desperate need to dump *all* our baggage and receive God’s unconditional forgiveness. *Now!* Because *now* is all we can be certain that we have.

What if you might not live to see the next Lent? What if your next thought were your very last? If we looked at ourselves through that perspective, we might feel differently about returning to God with all our hearts as soon as possible.

And that is why the Lenten practices—about which Jesus speaks in tonight’s Gospel—prayer, fasting, and charitable giving, can help us draw closer to God.

Prayer is conversation with the Lord, even though, admittedly, it is often one-sided on our part, because we don't take time to listen to His response.

Fasting means giving up *whatever* may be distracting us from thinking more about God *or* others, reading the Bible, or coming to church.

Charitable giving, especially if it is truly sacrificial, stretches us beyond ourselves and thereby humbles us. And humility is always the fastest path back to God.

Remember the simple "Jesus Prayer" I've taught you before? "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Short, but powerful. Especially when you repeat it over and over like a mantra. It is definitely humbling, and can quite effectively reconnect you with God.

I know a woman who thinks she's such a wonderful Christian. She can't wait to tell people all the things she does for others. Along with, how *grateful* they are; how *much* they enjoy the food she makes for them; or how *good* she felt giving away those items of clothing. I have to stifle myself from interrupting: "Uh, do you remember Jesus said in Matthew 6:3, 'when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing'?"

As we go about our prayers, fasting, and charitable giving, we are not to not show off or pat ourselves on the back about our own righteousness. As the Prophet Joel says: "rend [or tear open] your hearts and not your clothing." Go about your spiritual practices quietly and with reverence. As Jesus cautions us: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then *you have no reward* from your Father in heaven." Ouch. That's hard to hear.

Therefore, may our Lord Jesus Christ, who so perfectly modeled sacrificial spiritual discipline, give us the wisdom, grace, discernment, resources, patience ... and humor, to live a holy Lent, that we may journey to Easter confident that we shall hear from Him, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," as we enter into the joy of our Lord.

In His Name we pray. Amen.

¹⁴ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for Lent 2017," (qtd. Homily, 8 January 2016), 7 February 2017, [Vatican City](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2017/2/7/messaggio-quaresima.html) <<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2017/2/7/messaggio-quaresima.html>> 22 February 2022.

² Adapt. Evaristus Abu, "The Best Time to Repent is Now," n.d. [CatholicforLife.com](https://www.catholicforlife.com) <<https://www.catholicforlife.com/year-c-homily-for-ash-wednesday-3-2/>>

³ "Funny Procrastination Quotes," n.d. [SolvingProcrastination.com](https://solvingprocrastination.com) <<https://solvingprocrastination.com/procrastination-quotes/>> 22 February 2022.

⁴ "John Wesley Quotes, [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com) © 2022 <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/12757-do-all-the-good-you-can-by-all-the-means>> 22 February 2022.