

[Joel 2:1-2,12-17](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)

[Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)

[Psalm 103](#)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO, S.O.SC., RECTOR OF ALL HALLOWS PARISH, SOUTH RIVER, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND, ON ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2013, AT ALL HALLOWS CHAPEL AND THE BRICK CHURCH

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

There is a popular program on the history channel called “*Life After People*,” which is a television speculative fiction series on which scientists, structural engineers and other experts speculate about what might become of Earth should humanity instantly disappear. The featured experts also talk about the impact of human extinction on the environment, and the vestiges of civilization thus left behind.

What if an asteroid is hurtling down to planet Earth. In only a week's time, this extreme impact and devastation will take place. The end of the world is coming. All the world leaders and politicians ponder on what last words they can say to their peoples. And clergy leaders also compare notes on what biblical text to prepare their congregations for the end of the world - the *eschaton* - the consummation of all there is.

The Prophet Joel proclaims:

*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--  
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.*

In the context of the Prophet Joel, this passage is a metaphor for the attack of the locusts on the open fields, an actual historic event, which he uses to support his oracle and prophecy. The city will not be spared of the onslaught of the overwhelming mass of insects either.

*Shofar* is the Hebrew word for trumpet. The blowing of the *shofar* indicates the summoning of the troops in light of an impending attack. The locusts are so numerous that Joel calls them “a great and powerful army.” They block the sun, resulting in a day of darkness and gloom. This certainly feels and looks like the end of the world.

But when the situation is literally darkest, God calls the people to repentance.

*"Rend your hearts and not your garments,"* the Prophet exhorts us.

Perhaps, our interior conversion will move the invisible God who is in control of all of nature. Perhaps, God will have mercy on the people in light of the impending doom that Israel is facing. Maybe, God will deliver the human race from destruction after all.

The Prophet Joel further points out the favorable attributes of God to the people:

*..for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.  
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
and leave a blessing behind him.."*

Faith expressed in this way is a beacon of hope amidst doom and despair. That's what the world needs. That's the deeper meaning of today - Ash Wednesday. It's not that we have anything special to with which to bargain when it comes to our fate, vis-a-vis, disasters, natural or otherwise.

Rather, the only recourse we have is divine grace and mercy. When ashes are imposed on our foreheads, we know that we are vulnerable when it comes to our composition. We cannot save ourselves. Thus, we rend our hearts and resolve to trust in the holy hope that God will deliver us from our distress, doom and death. Yes, even death. The ashes we receive today remind us that will day, we will all be dust to dust, earth to earth and ashes to ashes. But we also believe that the powerful God can turn these ashes back to life.

There is a fine line between having faith in God and being too presumptuous, which shows a lack of humility and lack of repentance. The Prophet Joel has made it clear. He is telling the people of Israel to repent and start a fast and offer sacrifices to God. Maybe then, God will pardon their offenses and save them. He is not saying, "Do all this and God will certainly save you." What he means is that we ought to repent anyway, and rely on God's grace and mercy, not our own presumption or wishful thinking.

We should trust in God. We should trust in the possibility that perhaps God will save us. And with that possibility, we shall begin our Lenten fast and resolve to lead a renewed life.

Jesus said in today's Gospel,

*"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

By having these ashes on our foreheads, we proclaim to the world that our treasure is heaven. Saint Francis once said, *"You may be the only Gospel your neighbor ever reads."*

Let the cross-shaped ashes on our foreheads be a living testimony for the faith that is in our hearts - *"Remember that you are dust, and to dust, you shall return.* And the God in whom we believe, will bring life out of our dust.

Amen.