

Joel 2: 12-18

¹²Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. ¹⁴Who 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? ¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. ¹⁷Between 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?'"

¹⁸Then the LORD became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people.

2 Corinthians 5: 20 - 6:2

²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

6 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

Matthew 6:1-21

6 "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. ²"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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵"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. ⁶But 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.

¹⁶"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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.

Has anyone been shoveling snow lately? Has anyone been shoveling snow lately and saying to themselves “I am so out of shape---I need to start exercising more.” ??

This can happen in any number of situations that suddenly arise. One day your college student calls to say she is moving. So here you are two days later lifting and pushing and hoisting things up and down the stairs right? Saying to myself “I need to start exercising more.”

Maybe the dog gets out and there you go, all of a sudden, running down the street. Maybe your toddler child starts running away from you in the parking lot and you have to chase her down.

Maybe a friend calls with a flat tire and you are off to help.

“I need to exercise more” we say.

And then, in a flash of insight and brilliance we confess “if I had been exercising all along, getting my priorities straight, this snow shoveling/lifting/chasing children thing would be ALOT easier.”

Come with me now as I work this into a metaphor.

It’s snowing in America. It’s snowing everywhere on planet earth. It’s snowing fear. It’s snowing greed. It’s snowing violence. It’s snowing prejudice. It’s snowing suicidal depression, it’s snowing starvation and political upheaval, it’s snowing abuse of people and the environment.

It’s knee deep on our driveways and in our church parking lots and everywhere really, and it’s still coming down, and millions in our communities and our nation and our world, overwhelmed by this massive blizzard of fragmentation and suffering, overwhelmed by the depth of our collective dysfunction, are looking to the world’s great religious communities including communities like ours, who name the name of Jesus, and asking “Where is their God?”

And for good reason I suppose. Those of us who name the name of Jesus, this Jesus whose fervent prayer was that his people would be one, are almost as fragmented and dysfunctional as the population at large.

How do we begin to shovel the snow of humanity’s troubles away?

If we had been as committed as we should have been to the daily work of prayer and the exercises of the spiritual life long before now, the challenges of our mission in the world would not be as daunting as they now seem.

And the rest of the world would be seeing in us a quality of radiance, of soulful depth and compassion and wisdom that might actually compel them to listen to us when we call out to them, “be reconciled to God,” or when we urge them to understand that God is indeed present, with all the strength and hope we need to shovel the snow, “today is the acceptable time, today is the day of salvation.”

The Gospel is STILL good news for humanity. But we, its witnesses, have not made a very compelling case. We’ve not been doing our exercises!

Today, we can re-commit to the soul strengthening exercises that produce, by the grace of God, the fruits of joyful ministry, joyful snow shoveling in all the ways our world needs us to be giving our lives away for the sake of the Gospel.

“Return to me with all your heart” says the Lord. “Pray and fast” Jesus says.

Exercising the soul is not complicated. Don’t make a production of it like some people do. Exercise the soul every day-----find the exercises that work for you and do them every day.

Slowly but surely, (you know this right?) slowly but surely, the Godly qualities of graciousness and mercy will begin to shine in us as we meet the troubles of our world with hope and compassion.

Slowly but surely the time will come when it will no longer be said among the peoples
“Where is their God?”

Amen