

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
February 17, 2010 Ash Wednesday

Hampton Baptist  
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## “When ‘I Can’t’ Is Enough”

While most Baptist churches do not offer Ash Wednesday Services, Hampton Baptist began this tradition in recent memory. In my conversations with other Baptist pastors, I am learning that more and more Baptist churches recognize the importance of being part of the greater Christian family. While most of us who were raised as Baptists did not observe Lent when growing up, we continue to learn and embrace the season and what it means.

While all of the readings from the Lectionary were offered this evening, I’d like to focus on the Old Testament Lesson from Joel which extended a plea for the community to gather at a service of confession and repentance. That is what we are doing tonight; while the prophet tendered this clarion call inviting even children, infants, and those whose schedules include weddings, to confess and repent, this occurred because their community was in trouble. We find no specific sins listed in the text, only a call to come together for confession and repentance. God requested that the people return with all their heart with fasting, weeping, and mourning. And the reason that they as *sinful* people could return to a *holy* God? Because God is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

Because of God’s grace, we are allowed a way back to God. The forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist, proclaimed in the wilderness, “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” He preached tirelessly that people should change.

In our society, change becomes *embraced* if people find themselves *unhappy*; change becomes *unwelcomed* if people find themselves *comfortable*. Having an Ash Wednesday Service at Hampton Baptist is a change. Observing the season of Lent is a change. For some, perhaps the idea of repentance is a change. During this Lenten season, we will continually focus on how *we* need to change as individuals to become closer to God.

Lent remains somewhat of a foreign concept to many, as this story illustrates. “Today we’re going to talk about Lent,” Tanya announced at the beginning of the adult class she had been teaching for more than 20 years. “It dawned on me the other day that in all the years I’ve been teaching this class we’ve never talked about Lent.”

The class members seemed to agree, and Tanya began her Lenten discussions by giving the class members some background on the history of Lent. Then she asked her class how they thought about Lent.

“Mostly I think of Lent as a time to give up something, make some kind of sacrifice,” said Jerry. “I’ve just about run out of things to give up on though. Don’t know what I’ll give up this year.”

Shawn saw Lent from a different angle. “I think Lent is about repentance,” he said. “It’s a time to rethink your life before God and dedicate yourself anew to be about the will of God. I know I can do better with my life. Lent’s good for me that way. It gets me into thinking about what I can do to better myself in the eyes of God and in the eyes of others.”

“How do the rest of you feel about that?” Tanya asked.

“I think Shawn’s got it about right,” replied another member. “Lent is about repentance all right. I know *I* can do a lot better with *my* life, too.”

“What *is* true repentance?” Tanya asked them.

"It's feeling sorry for your sins," said one. "It's feeling sorry for your sins plus a vow of improvement. I *can* do better. That's the heart of repentance." As the class discussed the matter of true repentance they came to general agreement. Repentance consists of at least two acts. First, it's feeling sorry for what you've done wrong. Second, it's a promise that you can and will do better in the future.

Tanya let the class mull over their consensus for a few moments. Then she announced rather sternly, "Well, I for one disagree totally with this kind of thinking about repentance. I've been repenting like that all of my life, but it never seems to do *me* any good. I don't think it's done all of you much good either. Here, we all say that each year in Lent we feel sorry for our sins and promise that we *can* and *will* do better, but who does any better? I don't, for one.

"It seems to me that my promises are just like so much straw in the wind. I say I can and *will* do better, but I don't. That's made me think about this repentance business in a new way. What's the point of promising we can do better all the time when we don't do it anyway? This year, I decided that I'm not going to promise that I *can* do better. This year, I'm going to confess to God that I *can't* do any better. I've said, 'I *can*,' for years, but I don't. So why not just tell God, 'I can't.' I *can't* do better Lord. That's why I come to you. I don't have the power to remake myself, but *you* have the power to remake *me* as a new person.

"This year in Lent I'm just going to say to God, 'I can't.' I'm going to ask God to do for me what I *can't* do for myself. I think that's what true repentance is all about. To 'return to the Lord with all your heart,' means to turn away from running my life under my own power and offering my life to the power of God."

("Lectionary Tales for The, Richard A. Jensen, CSS Publishing, Lima, Ohio, 1994, 0-7880-0081-0 **True Repentance** by Richard A. Jensen)

That story makes sense to me. Under our own power, we *see* the sin in our life; we *confess* it; we repent with the intentions of not repeating the sin. Repentance means turning around and not committing that particular act any longer. Most of us have repented of some sin: intentionally and deliberately told God that we would not do that again. We have felt sorry for our offense and vowed not to repeat it. This happens for a while, until something *triggers* us, propelling us into those thoughts or those actions again. We think *more* of ourselves than we ought to think. Our culture has taught us that if we try a bit harder, we *can* do better. Perseverance and determination become more than goals; those words embody the strength which we seek. Yet *as* humans, we were created to *be* humans: fallible, finite creatures whose primary instinct is *survival*.

We don't like to say, "I can't." Supervisors, coaches, and parents don't want to hear "I can't." The words "I can't" receive little praise from the power brokers of our society; these words denote weakness among the strong, and we don't want to be perceived as being weak. We prefer to be labeled as steady and unassailable with the ability to do anything to which we place an effort. Yet frankly, under our own power, we cannot fully repent. If we have habits that haunt us, pitfalls that plague us, grievances which grip us, and sins that shackle us, then only God can free us. Saying "I can't" may be the strongest statement we can offer on Ash Wednesday. Recognizing that we are powerless to do it alone, to move forward by ourselves, we can declare to God, "I can't," followed by the plea, "but you can." Jesus said, "With humans this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible." Of what do you need to repent? What pattern steals your joy? What happened in your past that still affects you adversely? Whom do you need to forgive?

On this Ash Wednesday, rather than making promises to God which cannot be kept, it is enough to confess to God, "I can't do this by myself; I need your help. I will depend on *you* O God. Help me to be more like Jesus."

### **IMPOSITION OF ASHES**

The Imposition of Ashes encompasses Old Testament tradition as well as New Testament faith in an act of penance for sins committed and a prayer for God's forgiveness and grace. The ashes on the skin become a visible reminder of reconciliation.

Prayer:

Almighty God,

You have created us out of the dust of the earth. Grant that these ashes be to us a sign of our own mortality and penitence, so we may remember that only by your gracious gift are we given everlasting life. Thank you for offering us a way back, and that you still call us one of your own. We offer this prayer in the name of your Son, the One who gave his life for us, even Jesus the Christ. AMEN.