

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Wednesday, February 18, 2015
Ash Wednesday**

EVEN THEN

Matthew 6:1-18

I think it's fair to say that no piece of writing by any American author has been more derided, more ridiculed and in our day more ignored than Jonathan Edward's sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. How many of you have read that when you were in school? Did you ever hear anyone have a good word to say about it? Did *you* ever have a good word to say about it? If it's read at all these days, and I'd be willing to bet there's not a public school student in America who reads that except on their own initiative anymore, but if it's read at all it's read as an artifact of a bygone age that's left to the ash heap of history along with witch burnings and the Spanish inquisition. Modern people simply can't stand stuff like this. So it is that natural men are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell. They have deserved that fiery pit and are already sentenced to it and God is dreadfully provoked. His anger is as great towards them as to those who are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of His wrath in hell. And they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger. Neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment. The devil is waiting for them. Hell is gaping for them. The flames gather and flash about them and would fain lay hold on them and swallow them up. The fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out and they have no interest in any mediator. There are no means within reach that can be any security to them. In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of. All that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance of an incensed God. They don't write that anymore, do they?

The disdain with which the modern world holds this sermon is unfortunately a measure of the ignorance of the modern world, for in it the greatest of all American preachers was doing nothing more than explaining the teaching of Scripture, the Word of God, and warning his listeners to take that message seriously. The truth of the matter is despite the reputation that sermon has, what Jonathan Edwards was doing in it was preaching the same message that we heard earlier in the reading from Corinthians: "Be reconciled to God." He wasn't frightening people. He certainly wasn't trying to scare them. He was imploring them to "be reconciled with God." This is the way he concluded: "Let everyone who is yet out of Christ and hanging over the pit of hell, whether they be old men and women, or middle-aged or young people or little children, now hearken to the loud calls of God's word and providence. This acceptable year of the Lord, a day of such great favor to some, will doubtless be a day of remarkable vengeance to others. Men's hearts harden and their guilt increases of haste at such a day as this. If they neglect their souls, and never was there so great danger of such persons being given of hardness of heart and blindness of mind, therefore let everyone that is out of Christ now awake and fly from the wrath to come."

There's absolutely nothing in this sermon that suggests that Edwards took any pleasure whatsoever from this message of warning. He was genuinely concerned about the eternal fate of the people to whom he was preaching. And that's the message for Ash Wednesday. That's a message for each of us here. It's the message that the prophet Joel delivered to the people of Israel, a warning of judgment and a call to be delivered from wrath into the hands of grace. "You see," he said to Israel and he says to us, "judgment is coming whether we like it or not." It's interesting. In the very first verse Joel makes clear to whom it is that he is speaking, and it is not Assyria, it is not Babylon, it is not Egypt, it is not Syria, it is not Lebanon, it is not any of the pagan tribes around Israel. He begins by saying, "Blow the trumpet in Zion. Sound the alarm on My holy hill. Wake up My people." They are the ones who need to know that judgment is coming. Not so they can sit back and enjoy what's going to happen to all those other people out there whom we know are going to get everything they deserve. No. The message here is, "Wake up, My people. Blow that trumpet" so that they know that judgment approaches for them, every bit as much as for the pagans. The second part of verse 1 says, "Let all who live in Zion tremble." Not celebrate. Not party down because the big bad folks on the other side of the fence are going to get theirs. No. "Let all who live in Zion tremble." Because that judgment will not be pleasant. He says about the judgment that is close at hand, "A day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness." Those are not pictures that we associate with happy days. When we want to give people a picture of happy and carefree and enjoyable days we show a cloudless sky on Miami Beach, not a snowy day in Fairfax County. Darkness, gloom, clouds, blackness – that's the picture that we get here. And it's a picture that has behind it something even more fearsome. "Like dawn spread across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come." What he's describing here is the army of Assyria. Joel wrote in the years before the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 712 B.C. He was warning them, "They're coming and you can't stop them!"

The idea of Israel putting up any kind of military effort against the Assyrians in their day would be as though the United States decided to invade Vatican City and the inhabitants of Vatican City were told, "You're about to be invaded! Call out the Swiss guards! Fight to the last man!" How long do you think that would last? That's how long Israel was going to last in the face of the Assyrians. In chapter 1 of Joel, the army that is coming upon them is described this way: "Hear this, you elders. Listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation. What the locust swarm has left, the great locusts have eaten. What the great locust have left the young locusts have eaten. What the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten." The Assyrian army is described like locusts – people who will destroy everything in their path and leave nothing.

You've all heard of the ten lost tribes of Israel? These are the ten lost tribes. The ten tribes of the northern kingdom disappeared from history after the Assyrian invasion because they were carried off by an Assyrian policy that said those who didn't die in the invasion were to be uprooted and scattered throughout the Assyrian empire so that they

would prove no threat to the political power and ruler. And so it is that the tribes of Reuben and Issachar and Ephraim and others simply passed out of history never to be heard from again. That's what would come, and that's what Joel was warning them about.

But it wasn't just a military invasion he was warning them about, because that invasion was not simply an accident of history. It was, instead, as the Babylonian invasion of Judah two centuries later would be, an act of God. It was His way of bringing judgment on people who are desperately crying out to be changed, who like the people whom Jonathan Edwards described didn't want God to intervene. Didn't want God to mess around in the lives that they had made for themselves. Didn't want God mucking up the arrangements that they were comfortable with. Instead, they were willing to take whatever came and they would eat and they would drink and they'd be merry because tomorrow they would die. And God's in His heaven, we're down here. Let Him do His thing and we'll do ours. That was what was coming to Israel. And in the process it prefigured the great judgment that will come upon all people. Once again, I don't exclude us. That will come on *all* people. The only question is, will we be ready for it when it comes? The modern world and much of the modern church, I hate to say, hates it when we talk about judgment. Unfortunately, modern folks have convinced themselves, and all too often we convince ourselves, that a loving God would never judge anyone. God loves us too much to hold us accountable for the lives that we live. So there's nothing to fear. Nothing to worry about. And it's the theme of judgment that sin will not be allowed to stand. That theme runs from one end of Scripture to the other. If there is anything that is crystal clear from the message of the Word of God, it is that God hates and despises sin and in His kingdom He will have none of it.

That being the case, Ash Wednesday for us is part of preparing for that judgment. And as Joel makes clear to Israel, the way to prepare for that judgment, and the theme of Lent as we get ready for Easter, is to return to God. Israel is given the opportunity, in the face of this coming judgment, to return to the Lord. They are told in verse 12, "Even now," declares the Lord, "even now return to me with all your heart and with fasting and weeping and mourning." Not that the outward signs are going to save them, but the outward signs become signs of what is happening within them, that they are no longer disregarding God. They are no longer blowing Him off. They are no longer telling Him, "We don't need Your help and we don't need Your ways." Instead, this call to weeping and fasting and mourning is a call to take our hearts and our minds, with our actions to follow, back to Him. The return is in actions as well the heart. He makes that clear in verse 13 when he says, "Rend your heart and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God. Rend your hearts and not your garments. It's not enough to pull apart your tunic. That was a sign of mourning, a sign of grief in those days. They would take their shirt and they would rip it open and that would tell everyone how bad they felt about things. And Joel's saying that's great, but it's got to come out of a genuinely broken heart rather than being simply an outward sign.

In the same way, in a few moments those of you who wish to will have an opportunity to come forward and to have the mark of our mortality and the mark of our fallenness

placed upon your forehead in the form of ashes. You all know the biblical expression that from ashes you come and to ashes you will return. Sometimes “dust” is used there. Same idea. You’re going to have an opportunity to do that. You cannot mistake that sign for what it signifies. What it is meant to signify is that you recognize your mortality. You recognize your sinfulness. You recognize your brokenness. You recognize that you have wandered from God. I just realized that I did something that I rarely do and I apologize. I used “you” instead of “we.” Because I include myself in that. It’s not just for all you lay peons. That includes everyone who would carry the mark of Christ. Not just some ashes on the forehead but the sign of deep repentance in the heart. That’s an opportunity that was given to Israel, not because they were wonderful people and God really wanted to try to get them out of the mess they’d made. It was an opportunity that was given to them because of who He is. Verse 13 goes on to say, “Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God.” Why? “For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love, and He relents from sending calamity.”

We need to be clear what that last expression means. He was not telling them, “Turn back to Me and nothing bad will ever happen to you.” He wasn’t even saying, “Turn back to Me and I can guarantee you that I will stop the Assyrians on the Golan Heights and they will never get to you.” What He was telling them is, “Through the storm that is to come, there is a way to weather it and the way to weather it is to return to Me. The storm may still break over you.” He wasn’t saying one way or the other whether it would or not. There are no guarantees given here, but when the storm comes, He would bring them through it. And He would bring them through it because of who He is. He says in verse 14, who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing. Maybe that the Assyrians will be turned back at the border. By some miraculous occurrence, God sending a host of angels, who knows? He did it on one occasion. You remember the story that’s told in Kings about the death of 185,000 Assyrians on one night. Not because the Israelites happened to have a time travel machine and so they were able to bring home a battalion of Abrams tanks to cut through archers and cavalymen of the Assyrians who just couldn’t stand up to modern mechanized armor. No, the Israelites didn’t have anything to do with it. Those 185,000 were cut down by an angel of the Lord. So, are miracles possible? Sure. Might Israel be delivered and be able to continue its existence as a nation? Maybe so, maybe not. But He holds out the possibility. It didn’t happen that way, but I suspect that there were many in Israel who in fact were able to weather even a storm that destroyed their nation and scattered the northern ten tribes because they were able to hold on to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

That call goes out to us as well. It’s easy for us to get comfortable, to think, “Well, I’m a Christian. I’ve been in church all my life. I was baptized. I support the budget. I’m there every Sunday. I preach the Gospel.” It’s easy to look at each of those things and say, “Well, obviously I must be okay.” And yet what did Paul say to the Corinthians, to a people who are identified, even in the midst of a pagan society, with Christ. What did he say? “Be reconciled to God.” Because he knew that this was a people that was walking afar off. And so, even leaving aside the question of their eternal faith, would they spend eternity in heaven or in hell? Even leaving that aside, there was still judgment to come. And each of us will be judged on the basis of our works, on the way that we conduct

ourselves in our marriages and in our jobs, by the way that we relate to our children, by the way that we treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, by the concern that we have and the actions that we take on behalf of the defenseless.

We will be judged on those things. And I don't know about you, but the idea of standing before God, even knowing that Christ has taken my sin upon Himself, nevertheless knowing where I had gone wrong and where I have wasted opportunities and where I had turned my back on Him, that idea scares the daylights out of me. Not because I worry about hell but, quite frankly, I worry about looking Him in the eye and having Him say, "Could you please explain?" To tell you the truth, I'd just as soon not. And all of God's people would just as soon not, because if we are indeed His, our desire in life, as it should have been that of Israel, is not to find out where the boundaries are beyond which we can't go and snuggle up right against them and push the limits as far as we can. No. Our desire would be to get as far from those limits as possible, as close to models of Christ in the world as we possibly can be. Paul even told the Ephesians this is one of the most important things about church. This is one of the most important things that the leaders of the church are trying to accomplish both in themselves and in you, to enable you to grow daily, ever more close to the image of Christ. And to the extent that that doesn't happen, judgment awaits. But even now is the day of salvation. Even now is the day to turn from the world, from its temptations, from all the stuff that seems so important. Even now is the time to turn and to run back into the hands of a gracious God.