Text: Joel 2:12-19

**Introduction**

Having just come back from Vegas the tune “My Way” floated through my mind in preparation. Maybe Sinatra’s signature song is about as far away from Ash Wednesday as you can get. “Regrets, I’ve had a few, but then again, too few to mention…For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught. To say the things he truly feels, And not the words of one who kneels.”

Now there is something very masculine in those words and that pose. It used to be the joke that Sinatra started his career with a fanbase of all women and ended it with all men. But when you start taking the assertions seriously, by which I mean get past their braggadocio, things start to fall apart. Because if the end is truly near, most people I’ve known in that situation are well past the macho. Regrets pile up at the same time as you can’t get out of bed and stand tall. Far from taking careful steps and charting your course, we are led where we don’t want to go.

But that final assertion of man, what has he got, is the one that is the deepest lie. There are certainly times it might feel right saying what you truly feel, but however good they felt in the moment, most of the time I’ve said unconsidered words, I’ve come to regret them. The highest good within the song is not being one who kneels. But that is just not who man is. All men kneel. Even kings. Death is undefeated. The better question is who one kneels to.

**Text**

The situation in the prophet Joel is of impending famine. A locust swarm has descended upon Judah and one of biblical proportions. What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. And what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. They even at the bark off the olive trees and made their branches white. The harvest is gone and the seed corn has been eaten. It’s the Day of the Lord. A day of deep darkness.

“Yet even now.”

It’s the call to Israel to understand just who YHWH is, just who their God is.

Yet even now…when all is lost…when in the midst of deep darkness…when the true way is lost.

Yet even now, return…return to me with all you heart.

And what does such a return – a penitential season – look like?

Yes, it includes fasting and weeping and mourning. These are fine outward signs. Like ashes on the forehead. But the outwards signs are just that. Much more important, “rend your hearts and not your garments.” Bring forward your regrets, more than a few. Bend the knee to the LORD your God. Return.

Why? Why would I compound my misery with such humiliation? Why should I just not boast of taking the blows and doing it my way?

Because this is the Lord your God. Gracious and merciful. Slow to anger. Abounding in steadfast love. When we are doing it our way. God remains faithful to his promises. When we are fragile ego, God is gracious. What skin off his nose is it? When we would jump at the smallest slights, He is slow to anger.

God, the Father of Jesus Christ, does not send the locust because he desires his world to be stripped. “He relents over disaster.”

“Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him?” You, Israel, know this. You were slaves and he lead you out. You were far from God and he brought you near. You were lost, and he found you, calling you from every corner you had stayed. You know that God intends not disaster but repentance. And in repentance, restoration and glorification.

So blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate the fast…gather the people…the elders to the infants…even the newlyweds still in their chamber. Seek the Lord, today, while he may be found.

For today is the favorable time. Now is the day of Salvation.

The Father has sent his son to you – with grain, and wine and oil – the bread of life and the wine of gladness. And you will be satisfied.

Not doing it your way, but walking the way of the LORD. Having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Yet even now, return with all your heart. Amen.