

Proclaim a fast, call an assembly; Gather the people, notify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children...

We have taken these words of the prophet Joel to heart. Here we are—gathered—young and old, together in this Church to begin a Lenten Fast. We have heard the call and responded. What do we do now?

For the people to whom Joel uttered these words—they began a period of repentance and prayer. They were being asked to leave their customary ways behind and focus on their relationship with their God who had walked with them, protected them, forgiven them and called them his own special people. The change they were being asked to make went deeper than externals—deeper than sack cloth and ashes. They were being asked to rend their hearts—not their garments. They were being asked to return to the Lord with their whole heart.

Hopefully for us today, the same is true. We are being called for the next six weeks to return to the Lord with our whole heart. To move beyond externals to changing our hearts.

How many gathered here today have asked themselves the question—what am I giving up for Lent this year? Or perhaps you have already decided and have begun the fast.

Sometimes this question of what to give up is a difficult one. We want to strike the right balance between not giving up something really hard and yet hard enough to be sure we suffer enough to get God's approval.

But there may be a more important question to consider. Is this an external—is this rendering my garments without the deeper challenge of changing my heart. Do we rationalize if I give God this external thing, maybe he won't ask me to do this or to change that. Maybe He won't notice the thing or action or issue that nags at my heart that I know needs changing.

How am I being asked to return to the Lord? What in my heart needs to change? Is it an action, an attitude, a relationship?

We are asked to pray to spend more time in quiet reflection in the presence of the Lord listening to Him. Giving alms focuses our attention on others by giving what

we have to offer them a better life. And fasting from those things that keep us from responding to others enables us to love more freely.

On the day of our baptism the Lord invited each of us into a life-long relationship of love and fidelity. We entered into the process of becoming who we are—a son, a daughter of the Father and a member of this community of faith.

It is a life-long project—of growing, of becoming and sometimes of missteps and failings.

Each year we are given this beautiful season of Lent to reflect on how our project of becoming is going. And we are given the challenge to align our hearts and our spirits with God's dream for us.

The season of Lent is a time of preparation for the celebration of new life at Easter. Whatever we commit ourselves to doing over the next several weeks should always be pointing us to that new life we are offered over and over again.

Ashes on our foreheads today symbolize that we have heard the call.

We are willing to step forward into places of change and growth—however challenging they may be.

Today we begin a journey—we move from the ashes we receive today to the baptismal water we will receive at Easter.

And we begin this journey not just as individuals—but as a community of faith—ready to support, encourage and cheer on one another. We are being given opportunities to come together to celebrate Mass, to participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and to grow together through the parish mission.

We walk this journey in our family, in our circle of friends and co-workers, in our neighborhoods. Hopefully—the change in our heart will be visible to all!

May our journey from ashes to the Baptismal waters bring us all to a renewed relationship with our God who loves us and with those who journey with us.