

## Podcast Transcript

3.2.2022 Ash Wednesday

- [Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12](#)
- [Psalm 51:1-17](#)
- [2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)
- [Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)

<<Music: “Building Up a New World,” 1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>  
 <<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

## Intro:

- Hello everyone, welcome back to “The Word is Resistance,” the podcast where we’re exploring what our Christian sacred texts have to teach us about living, surviving, even thriving in the context of empire, tyranny, violence, and repression – the context that has continued throughout the course of history into today’s world. What do our sacred stories have to teach us, as white people, about our role in resistance, in showing up, in liberation?
- Our theme music, *We are building up a new world* Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement sung by a multi-racial “movement choir practice in Denver CO in December 2014. It was led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.
- I’m Rev. Jean Jeffress. I’m a pastor in the United Church of Christ in Northern CA serving in what’s called the South Bay aka Silicon Valley. I live in the city of Oakland in what is in called the East Bay – both the South Bay and the East Bay exist on the unseated and ancestral lands of the Ohlone people. This podcast is a project of SURJ-Faith and is particularly designed for white people, white Christians – the idea is that white people will talk to other white people about race and white supremacy. We believe white people like many of you listening now, and like me, have a responsibility to commit ourselves to *resisting* white supremacy, to speaking up and showing up and disrupting white supremacy where we find it, including in our own Christian tradition. We’d love to hear from you and especially from people of color, and from listeners all faith traditions who might be checking us out. We’d love to hear how you think we’re doing.
- The Word is Resistance.

Welcome to Ash Wednesday, the beginning of our Lenten journey. Lent is the Christian season for intentional reflection, ritual and repentance. It’s a time to take stock of our lives and spiritual practices and work on getting in right relationship with our God. Or, in the language that many progressive Protestants really dislike, it’s a time to repent, to return to God and atone for our sins. It’s a solemn time and it begins with Ash Wednesday, the day we acknowledge our human frailty, our mortality – the day we acknowledge from where we have come and to where we will return – ashes and dust – the stuff from which God formed the first human, the stuff that forms galaxies, the stuff that is left after every wildfire and every carpet bombing – ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”>>

<< “*Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don’t get weary, though the way be long.*”>>

While the phrase, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” comes from Genesis 3:19, the Lectionary passage for Ash Wednesday most frequently used is from **Joel 2:1-2, 12-17.**

Here is today’s passage:

Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
     sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
 Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
     for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—  
**2** a day of darkness and gloom,  
     a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
 Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
     a great and powerful army comes;  
 their like has never been from of old,  
     nor will be again after them  
     in ages to come.  
 Yet even now, says the LORD,  
     return to me with all your heart,  
 with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
**13**   rend 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.  
**14** Who 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?  
**15** Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
     sanctify a fast;  
 call a solemn assembly;  
**16**   gather 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.  
**17** Between 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?’”

The context for this passage is the aftermath of a plague of locusts that destroyed all the vegetation, but decimating the food source for people and their livestock. This, of course, destroys the entire economy. The word of the Lord that comes to the prophet Joel isn't about coming destruction because the people have turned away from God, as we see with other prophets like Amos and Jeremiah. The word of the Lord that Joel receives is a lament in the aftermath of destruction. Chapter 1 in Joel outlines the destruction and all of the ways it will devastate the land its inhabitants and begins the call to repentance, which, incidentally mean, “to turn around, or to change direction.” In this case, to turn toward God. I just wanted to say that in case any of you were wondering why the people needed to repent because of locusts since that wasn't their fault. Repentance isn't necessarily about making up for wrongs we have committed or bad things we have done; repentance is a course correction. I think of it always as turning back toward God.

If the context for this passage, the “day of the Lord...day of darkness and gloom...day of clouds and thick darkness” is referring to a natural disaster why do the people need to repent? Even with the definition of turning toward God, locusts don't equal people turning away from God, do they? Maybe it's not the devastation that God is concerned about. I mean, what's done is done. Maybe God calls the people to come with fasting, weeping and mourning because God's concern is how the people will behave in the wake of disaster. Some of the ways that we know people behave in the wake of disaster, whether a natural disaster or human-made are hoarding supplies, price-gouging, violence, exploiting the weak and vulnerable. Maybe, through Joel, God was trying to head all that off, trying to decrease the suffering that people create in the midst of suffering. As hundreds of thousands of people flee Ukraine, African students have been denied access to buses, and trains, denied the ability to exit the country, have been left out in freezing weather, have been harassed and beaten while attempting to leave Ukraine. White supremacy has increased suffering in the midst of suffering. When I read the accounts of what some have endured, I want to crawl out of my skin and just not exist on this planet anymore. And what's sadder still, is that I'm not terribly surprised. I'm horrified, but I'm not surprised. Why would I be? Anti-blackness is a global sickness. I unequivocally support the people of Ukraine in this terrible and unjust fight, and my spirit is deflated with the news of the treatment of these students. It may be unpopular for me to name this, but if I'm to call out white supremacy where ever I see it – well, I see it. To learn more about this situation follow the hashtags #AfricansinUkraine or #BlackinUkraine.

Maybe this is why God put on Joel a lament and called the people together.

I found Dr. Wil Gafney's commentary very helpful in understanding what God is doing in this passage and what it means for the beginning of our Lenten journey. She reminds us that Joel is not blaming the people for the situation and that the natural disaster, the plague of locusts, is not a “divine punishment” and suggests that repentance, in this case, turning toward God, be “read as a rededication.” God's lament through Joel asks us to come closer to God, but to come with fasting and praying. This connects the passage to Ash Wednesday as Lent is a time of fasting and

praying. God, through Joel, calls everyone together including children and babies. God, through Joel, says to rend your heart, not your clothes. An outward sign of grief in the context of Joel would be to tear one's clothing. But here, God's not interested in the gesture, but God says let your heart break, take this in. God, through Joel, calls on priest, not to call out the sins of the people, but to pray for the people, "to the point of tears," Dr. Gafney says. She goes on to say, "The prophet even gives them a script, "Spare your people, Holy One, 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?'" In other words, Joel shames God a little so God will act for the people. I love how in the Hebrew Bible people don't hesitate to shame God if the situation warrants.

In the midst of disaster, it's easy to forget our humanity, to feel helpless, hopeless and for either of those feelings to manifest as aggression or paranoia, for prayer or spiritual practice to slip away, for fear to take over. We are human, frail, mortal, dust.

Today's passage, this first passage for our Lenten journey, helps us to remember who we are and whose we are. This is the story of a people being gathered together in the middle of tragedy, to remember who and what God is, "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." Dr. Gafney says, "This core description of God is foundational in Judaism and is repeated throughout the scriptures: see also Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; Jonah 4:2. All of these use forms of the root *rahm*, meaning womb to express God's tender love, often translated as "merciful." *Rahum* is the deep love that springs from the womb, no more separable than the heart is from heartache."

<< *Music interlude, verse 2 of "Building Up a New World."* >>  
<< *"Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don't get weary, though the way be long."* >>

God's lament given to Joel is an invitation to God's people to return, to "rededicate" as Dr. Gafney says to God. This invitation comes in the midst of tragedy, of disaster and devastation. Sometimes I wonder if that might be one of the only times people might accept such an invitation. The people are asked to repent, not because they are bad, but because God has something for them. In a time of absolute devastation and loss, a time that could be perceived as punishment, a time when are demoralized and desperate, Joel tells us that God is waiting for us with a love that is so tender, so merciful, so life-giving like "deep love that springs from the womb," so much so that when we return to it, we do so with weeping – for everything that we've lost, and everything that we can never lose. When those collide, that is the place where God's deep love holds us. It is both beautiful and painful.

Now, I'm not a paragon of spiritual disciplines. I usually will commit to something for Lent, but the rest of the year, I'm inconsistent. Sometimes I do prayer practice or quiet time. I go in and out of practices that help take care of my mind and body. But also, I am prone to spin in my anxiety and then my practices are eating carbs and binge-watching crime shows, staying up late for no other purpose than to be tired the next day. Maybe some of you can relate. So, I want to leave us with a question; what would it be like to accept God's invitation – to show up weeping and praying and letting ourselves be enveloped in the wombful love of our God? What if our practices this Lent were rooted in that?

My call to action this week is to check out #AfricansinUkraine and #BlackinUkraine where you will see the stories of what people are enduring. I put some twitter handles in the resources. There will be links in the transcript. Also, check out the links in the resources about locusts in East Africa. I'm looking for places to donate for both the African students trying to get out of Ukraine and the locust problem, but have not yet pinpointed any. If anyone out there knows more about this, please put links on our Facebook page.

Thank you so much for joining me from wherever you are in this world today. Let us know how your action goes – we'd love to hear from you all – by commenting on our Soundcloud, Twitter or Facebook pages. Tune in for a resistance word from Nichola Torbett.

You can find out more about SURJ at [surj.org](http://surj.org), and our podcast lives at Soundcloud; search on "The Word Is Resistance." We're also on Spotify. Give us a "like" or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. Transcripts are available as well on our website, which include references, resources, and action links. Finally, a huge thanks as always to our sound editor this week, Claire Hitchins! Thank you, Claire!!

(Words of blessing/encouragement)

- Blessings to you in all that you do.
- May God's wombful love overtake the madness of war
- Until next time. I'm Jean Jeffress.

<<Verse 3 of "Building Up A New World, Verse 1 repeated.>>  
 <<"Rise, Shine, Give God glory, Children of the Light"  
 We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.>>

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## RESOURCES

Link about locusts in East Africa

<https://www.usaid.gov/humanitarian-assistance/eastafricalocusts>

Link about locusts

<https://www.livescience.com/locusts.html>

Link about locusts and Lent:

<https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/02/locusts-and-lent-reflections-on-ash-wednesday-john-holbert-02-25-2011>

Twitter handles:

@DocumentingMN

@korrinesky

@TRiCiAKANTREL

Hashtags:

#AfricansinUkraine

#BlackinUkraine

## REFERENCES:

Dr. Wil Gafney's commentary:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ash-wednesday/commentary-on-joel-21-2-12-17-10>

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