**Turn Back! (Joel 2:12-17)**

Turning back to God in repentance does not apply to the individual, but the whole nation. Greetings dearly beloved on this Reformation Sunday, on which we celebrate the beginning of the Protestant Reformation with the nailing of Martin Luther’s 95 theses (or protests) on the main portal of the Cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. It is also appropriate to commemorate our Armenian Reformation as well, which resulted in the birth of the Armenian Evangelical Church in 1846, in the Pera section of Constantinople (Istanbul). In both above-mentioned cases, one of the primary foci was the simple (direct) preaching of the Gospel. As respect-worthy and well-known as the previous popular traditions were, they were not leading individual church members to personal devotion. Amazingly, even among the Israelites, before their exile in 586BC, most suffered from the same superficial faith as those from whom the above two reform movements eventually separated. Then, the prophets were constantly working against the people’s unbelief, preaching an inner repentance to God among the people. Today humanity’s plight is not so different. If we, for example, have not internally turned back to God from our waywardness, then we would be no different than those Israelites who trusted in the faith of their forefathers such as Abraham and other patriarchs for their salvation from calamity and disaster. We know, of course, what happened to them. God punished them so they would repent and forget their addiction to idol worship. It is exactly this, then, that we are going to be speaking about today. We’re going to study the image of repentance according to God’s paradigm, to see just how we can connect the concept of the past with our everyday lives. Once again, I believe the Word of God is saying to us that turning back to God in repentance does not only save the individual, but the whole nation. Let’s talk, then, about repentance…

The change that God expects from us only happens when we decide to repent. First of all, let us define the word “repentance”. (In the Armenian, the word “repentance” has the word for “world” in it.) Its meaning has nothing to do with the word “world” or its rejection as an act. The word in Armenian comes from the Classical Armenian, and it means to cry or weep, which happens often when there is a genuine turning back that happens with the one who expresses repentance.

Getting back to our subject from the passage, the prophet Joel’s ministry was similar to many of the other prophets’ ministries. He lived in a time period when a great mass of locusts was destroying the greenery of the land. The country was suffering also from a severe drought. His call was one of repentance to the Israelites. Despite the fact that God’s punishment would be severe if the people didn’t repent, there was still hope for them if they changed their hearts. God expected an internal change among the people, and not an external hypocritical show of piety. Even their faithfulness to the form of worship was no longer important when their inner spiritual lives were indifferent toward God and His Word.

Recently I went apple picking with my family and saw that the season for picking was almost over. I saw many apples which were obviously rotting. These reminded me of those people who are unbelievers both externally and internally. I also saw some apples that had only a little sign of fermentation or rot, and these reminded me of the Israelites’ spiritual state of being, as well as of those who are dishonest or inconsistent in their expression of spirituality. Externally, such people seem to be of faith, and are full of good things to say, yet who knows what kind of personal faith-life they have? This is just like asking, “Who knows what worms are in the apples that show signs of inner rot already?”

The call is clear, beloved.

God does not want external, fake spirituality. This is why he tells the people, “rend your hearts and not your clothing.” The tearing of clothing was a sign of distress among the people, but it was not necessarily a sign of a permanent internal change. God’s call is directed at a change in our spirituality overall. God is calling us to pray in gatherings, both to confess our personal sins to Him, as well as to ask Him as a nation for mercy and to be spared or delivered from various disasters.

This is also a good moment to remember that the Apostle Peter, as we read a little while ago, made the same call to repentance to his fellow Jewish countrymen in the book of Acts, and when they came to faith in Jesus via repentance, the church grew both in number and devotion. *Therefore, let us examine ourselves today and begin to plan to gather as families within our homes.* It is not necessary to have big gatherings. Also, instead of focusing on having a dinner or drinking that coffee, let us set aside time to pray together. Whoever is ready today, let them connect with one or two families, let the date be decided, and let the prayer gatherings begin in the homes. Because ***if we want our families, our church and our nation to change and become that wonderful image of the church that we heard in the reading of Acts, the reformation must start from us!* *It must start from us, who are called the people of the Gospel, the Evangelicals; from us, who spread like wildfire in the years after 1846 in Western Armenia with the call to repentance!***

It is time to rend our hearts, to gather together in prayer and fasting, and to beseech the Lord’s blessings and mercy for ourselves, for the church, and for the nation. The change that God expects from us only happens when we decide to repent. Turning back to God in repentance does not apply to the individual, but the whole nation.