**Introduction**

There are a few of these niceties that mark the differences between liturgical seasons. The last hymn on Friday – Alleluia, Song of Gladness – marks one of them. In the season of Lent the Alleluias and the Gloria in Excelsis or Hymn of Praise are removed. So the final hymn of the Transfiguation are the final alleluias until Easter morning.

Alleluia cannot always/be our song while here below/Alleluia our transgressions/Make us for a while forgo.

Lent is a penitential season. Penitential, which the dictionary helpfully defines as “of or relating to penitence or penance.”

**Trouble in the World**

I seem to remember Mrs. Medema in the 4th grade telling me I could use the word itself to define a word. All I’m doing is moving the desired definition a step away. What we are dealing with in a penitential season is the idea of penance. And for penance there are a few possible definitions. There are a couple that the Reformation really excludes stemming from the medieval Roman Catholic conception of the sacrament of penance. One would confess sins, receive the absolution, but for the absolution to be effective you did you penance. You had to do what the priest – on the authority of the pope – imposed as the act of contrition. If you didn’t do the act, you’d get a second much longer chance in purgatory. The sin would not be absolved. That act of penance informs our modern conception of giving something up. We’ve done away with verbal confession. We assume the absolution because God’s a good guy. And so we will forgo something as our bit of sending good vibes. The Reformation’s conception of confession and absolution does not include penance. It emphasized faith. Your sins have been paid for by Christ on that cross. Believe it. There is no act of penance because Christ has done it all.

But that doesn’t mean there isn’t a definition of penance that is worthy of Reformation Christian’s pondering. The first definition the dictionary gives is mortification or an act of devotion performed to show sorrow. I played a bunch of sports so I’m sorry for the analogy, but you could use business as well. When things are going well, when you are winning, anything goes. Teammates can do bad things to each other, but the next win erases everything. As long as you are making the Revenue targets and getting the bonusses, things can run loosey-goosey. But when we’ve been in those circumstances, we all eventually know that feeling, “this can’t go on.” You lose a couple games in a row. You miss a couple of quarters.

I think that has a real analogy to the Spiritual life. As long as things are going well, we can lose focus on our spiritual life. What were at first small breaks. I missed a day of prayer because I was tired. My bank account was empty because I bought something I shouldn’t have and I missed a tithe. But those small breaks become regular ones. And as long as life continues along, we don’t realize what we have lost. It often takes the introduction of some suffering to makes us look.

**Trouble in the Text**

That’s the story of Joel. Unlike most of the prophets, we don’t know much about Joel. All we know is that Israel has experienced an invasion of locusts. Now you can take that as a real crop failure. You could take the locusts as some type of plague – like the signs and wonders of the Exodus. It could be an invading army, maybe the Assyrians for the North or the Babylonians for the Southern Kingdom. The nations used in the rest of the book range from the ancient enemies of Egypt and Edom to the vary late mention of the Greeks.

Isreal has done what Isreal does. Grows fat and worldly. Turns away from Yahweh. Because things are good. And then they aren’t.

**Good News in the Text**

But this is the good news of Joel. “Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart…return…for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

This is a call to penance as mortification, as that solemn act of devotion that signals “I hear and believe.”

I now hear what God has been saying to me as things got loosy-goosy. I understand how small breaks in the Spiritual life have lead to this large chasm of sin. But I also believe what the LORD says about himself. He is gracious…abounding in steadfast love. That even now “he will send grain and wine and oil, and I will be satisfied.”

**Good News in the World**

A penitential season – Lent – is a season to tighten it up a bit. If you have been far away, if a chasm has opened, to make a solemn act of devotion.

If you are maybe not at that point, but at the “this can’t go on” stage. To recognize you are right. Take up the fast. Maybe the LORD will forgo the locust.

Maybe things feel fine. Pray. Pray for the Spirit to keep you in straight paths.

Maybe it is even better. Maybe you to need the penitential season at all. The world has no claim on you. Rejoice that your treasure is in heaven and give some alms to the needy.

Jesus’ words from the middle of the Sermon on the Mount are those eternal acts of penance. Fasting, Prayer, Charity. These are the acts of a penitential season. We hear and believe in the steadfast love of God for us in Christ. And we seek to have our hearts remain where neither locust devours nor thieves steal.