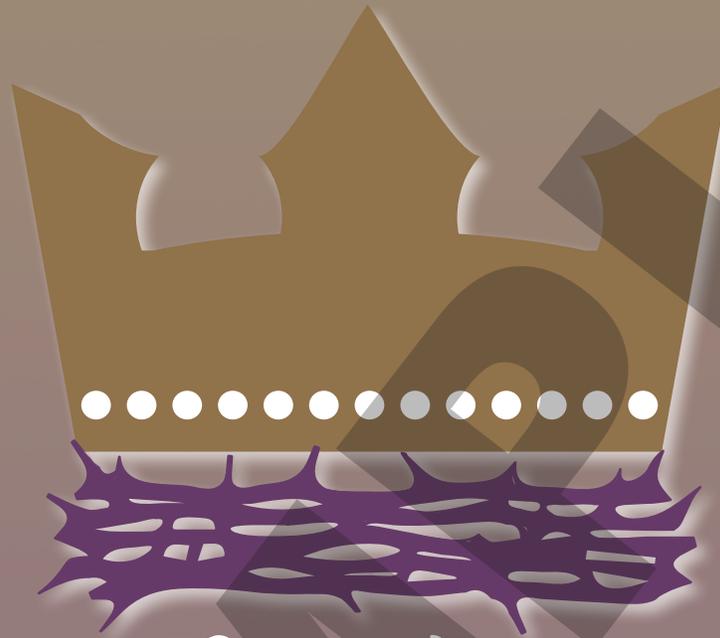


CONCORDIA SEMINARY  
LENTEN SERMON SERIES



*Lent for  
All Nations*

BEN HAUPT



Concordia  
Seminary  
ST. LOUIS

# “LENT FOR ALL NATIONS”

## BEN HAUPT

There is no denying that there’s a lot of talk about nationality, race, and ethnicity in our country these days. Both the left and the right have their talking points and agendas. But how do the Scriptures address these kinds of issues? And what can the church say without descending into partisan politics?

This Lenten series will examine characters in the New Testament and their explicitly named nationalities and ethnicities, because even these little details point us to Christ and teach us to love our neighbors. While it may be more obvious to consider the importance of Pontius Pilate’s or the Good Samaritan’s countries of origin, why do the Gospel writers want us to know that the Simon who carried Jesus’s cross hailed from Cyrene?

The series will offer well-researched, exegetical sermons that focus hearers’ eyes on Jesus in new ways. Materials like the CTCR documents on racism and immigration as well as other materials will be offered for further reading. By partnering with Mission Nation Publishing, there will also be opportunities to give thanks for the global church today by looking at modern missionaries who have come from various lands to North America to share the love of Jesus.

### SERMON 1 | ASH WEDNESDAY (JOEL 2:12-19)

*Theme: The Old Testament & Trinidad Castaneda*

### SERMON 2 (GALATIANS 3:7-14)

*Theme: Abraham and Walther*

### SERMON 3 (MARK 7:24-30)

*Theme: Yolima the Colombian & the Syrophenician Woman*

### SERMON 4 (MATTHEW 8:5-13)

*Theme: The Centurion and Shang Ik Moon*

### SERMON 5 (MATTHEW 27:27-32)

*Theme: Simon the Cyrene & the Khans*

### SERMON 6 | MAUNDY THURSDAY (JOHN 12:20-26)

*Theme: The Greeks & the Tongans*

### SERMON 7 | GOOD FRIDAY (JOHN 19:16B-30)

### SERMON 8 | EASTER SUNDAY (ACTS 10:34-43)

*Theme: Peter & Cornelius*

# SERMON 1: ASH WEDNESDAY

*Theme: The Old Testament & Trinidad Castaneda*

*Reading: Joel 2:12-19*

An LCMS pastor tells the story of the congregation he was called to serve in 2014. It was a small rural congregation like many congregations of our Synod. With a heritage of 100 years, the people of the small town had been worshipping there for a long time. But over the years, the population of the town began to change. People moved in who spoke a different language. They ate different food and celebrated different festivals. The church didn't know what to do other than to keep on doing things the way they had always done them. Membership and attendance began to dwindle as more and more immigrants moved in. By 2014, the town was 94 percent Hispanic. Can you imagine how disorienting such a scenario might have been for the members of this little congregation? The pastor says that the people began to cry out, "What has happened to our town? What has happened to our church?"<sup>1</sup>

There is a lot of talk these days about nations and people groups and where they should live. In the Middle East, civil wars, ethnic wars, and terrorism have devastated countries and displaced people. Some innocent victims of war and others not so innocent have all left their homelands and settled in other areas. Europe has had great debates about the migrating movements of these people groups. Some of these people have even sought refuge in America. Similar civil wars have displaced peoples in Africa and have brought people groups to America for the refuge that Lady Liberty might offer. America has had plenty of debates about immigration. People from Central and South America looking for work and a better way of life have come to our country, and others involved in drug smuggling and human trafficking have come across our borders. Heated debate has ensued about how America should deal with these issues. There are legitimate and significant points of disagreements among Democrats and Republicans, and these disagreements will not likely be solved quickly or easily.

As Christians, we should be involved in those discussions in civil and peaceful ways as good upstanding citizens. But it's important that we consider these issues not just as American citizens but also as followers of Jesus and people of his church. Our sermon series this Lent is entitled "Lent for All Nations." Over the next several weeks of Lent we want to set aside the tough issues of statecraft and how countries deal with immigration and instead explore what the Bible has had to say about issues of ethnicity and nationality. How does our citizenship in heaven under our Lord Jesus impact how we interact with all nations? How should we as Christians interact with the immigrant people we now live next to or who work with us or who are our kids' classmates? How do we interact with people who grew up in very different settings with very different cultures?

<sup>1</sup> For more information on this story, cf. <https://missionnationpublishing.com/what-has-he-done-with-my-church/>.

Our Ash Wednesday reading from Joel mentions “the nations.” And it gets God’s people thinking about how the nations view us and how they view our God. As God’s people do we have a responsibility toward “the nations”? And what does our personal relationship with God have to do with people from other countries and from ethnic backgrounds different from our own? Let’s take a deeper look to understand what the prophet Joel might have to say to us along these lines.

In Joel chapter 1, we hear about an invasion of the land of Israel. It’s an invasion so historic and monumental that Joel says people will be talking about it for generations to come. The vines and fig trees are not only stripped bare but utterly destroyed, never to produce fruit again. The fields of wheat and the storehouses of wine and oil are completely decimated. This doesn’t just mean that there won’t be any wine tastings for a while or that they’ll have to go to a different grocery to buy bread. God’s people are going to starve because of this invasion of the land. What’s worse, even the temple priests are not able to make their sacrifices in the temple. How will the people of God appease his anger and gain forgiveness? Who caused this invasion? Joel 1:6 “For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number; its teeth are lion’s teeth, and it has fangs of a lioness.” It was another nation, a foreign nation, a wicked nation that did this!

And yet, Joel does not write his book of prophecy to call God’s people to arms to wage revenge on the invading nation. It’s clear if you go home and read through the little book of Joel (and I’d recommend that you do just that) that in the end, all people who sin and especially those people who harm and kill and destroy God’s people will be judged on the final day. But this does not lead Joel to rally the troops against the nations. Rather, Joel reminds the people of God that it’s God who will do the avenging. It’s God himself who gets to call his angels to beat plowshares into swords to punish wrongdoers. When the Day of the Lord comes, all nations will be called before God’s throne, and they will have to answer for their sins and wickedness toward God, his people, and his creation.

But Joel specifically avoids calling his hearers to revenge against the invading nations. He leaves judgment to God alone. Instead, in the face of destroyed fields and orchards and vineyards, Joel calls God’s people to do something very different. He calls them to return to the Lord. With nothing in their hands to bring as an offering to God, Joel calls God’s people simply to turn to him. Remember, Israelites in this day were used to sacrificing a cow or a sheep or some pigeons or at least the firstfruits of their wheat or grape crops in order to ask God for forgiveness. But they don’t have any of these things! The nations had annihilated their animals and all crops for the season. They have nothing to offer God.

And yet God calls them back to him. While the Israelites are focused on the smoldering black fields that were once waves of golden wheat, Joel stands in the midst of all the destruction and calls their attention to something else, someone else. He calls them back to the God who created it all in the first place, to the God who still provided for their everyday needs. In the midst of their hunger, weeping, mourning, and broken hearts, the Israelites are simply called

to turn to God. Joel calls them to the promise of God that resounds throughout the Old Testament: “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” (Jl 2:13)

And this Lent we too are called back to the Lord our God who in 2020 is still gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. There are indeed struggles as we think about our town [city] and the challenges we face. **[Name some local challenges here that may be holding the attention of your hearers, especially challenges that have to do with other nations or people groups moving into town.]** It would be easy to let these challenges overwhelm us and tempt us to lose our confidence in our God and his work in our lives.

But this day our God is calling us back to himself. With Jesus’s holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, he made us his own so that we might live in his kingdom. And this same Jesus is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. He is making all things new. And so he calls us again today to return to him. Turn your attention away from all that troubles and worries that threaten to rip hope out of your chest, and return to the Lord your God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

That’s what happened in the little town with the LCMS church that I told you about a few minutes ago. As they looked around at their town and realized how much things had changed, they didn’t give up hope in their God and ours. Instead, they put their faith in Christ who makes all things new. They turned to him and his love and began praying for help. And they found it in a larger congregation not far away, a fellow LCMS congregation which began helping them to become messengers of hope to their community. As the people turned their repentant hearts toward our God, he turned their hearts toward their neighbors in love.

A missionary named Trini helped the congregation develop into a training center for missionaries to the community. The people who once were looking around and saying “What happened to my church?” are now reaching out to their community with the love of Jesus. Maybe the meals at the church potluck are flavored with different spices. Perhaps a different language is heard in the narthex. But the same God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love is the God of the congregation to this very day.

And this seems to be exactly the kind of thing Joel seems to have had in mind in our reading. He prays out loud to God this prayer: “Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” Joel wants God’s people to return to God but not only for their own salvation. He also wants this salvation for the nations too. He wants the nations to notice God’s goodness and mercy to his people. Later in Joel 2:28, Joel even prophesies, “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.” Joel wants all the nations to be saved and to turn to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob so that God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh, all nations of the earth.

This is a theme that we'll hear more about next week. For ever since God began sharing with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob that he was going to save the Israelite people, God also began to speak about the salvation of the nations that would come through the Israelite and Jewish people. And this theme of the salvation of the nations through God's people of Israel gets repeated throughout the prophets. Remember Joel's fellow prophet, Jonah, who was sent to the foreign nation of Nineveh to call them to repentance? Joel wants the same thing for the people that destroyed the crops and towns of the Israelites. Listen again to his pleading for the nations. "Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

As we turn back to our God this Lent, we turn back to a God who in Jesus Christ is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He is abounding in steadfast love not only for us but for all peoples of all nations. May the Spirit of God which has been poured out on all flesh, even on us, continue to turn many more back to him. Amen.

SAMPLE