



*“Yet even now, says the Lord,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
rend your hearts and not your clothing.*

*Return to the Lord your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,  
and relenting from punishment.”*

-Joel 2:12-13

## DEVOTIONAL

The ashes on your forehead are not for show. This is a day for honesty. The ash tells the truth about our bodies and our lives. We get tired. We get distracted. We carry habits we don't know how to put down. We say "I'm fine" when we are not. We drift, sometimes slowly, sometimes fast.

And God's word through Joel is not, "Prove yourself." It is simply, "Return to Me." Not once you've fixed it. Not once you've found the right words. Just return, because you are loved, because you are still wanted, because God is more interested in your heart than your image.

I wonder what I've been carrying that I've started to call normal. I wonder what I've been avoiding. I wonder what it would look like to come back, without excuses, without speeches, without pretending I'm further along than I am.

Ash Wednesday is not a finish line. It's a doorway. A chance to begin again.

# SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Put a hand on your chest and take 10 slow breaths.

Inhale: *"Here I am."*

Exhale: *"I return to You."*

## CLOSING PRAYER

God of mercy, You know my drifting and my defenses. Meet me here, in dust and in truth. Teach me how to return without performing. Hold me steady as I begin again. Amen.

