

Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

The prophet Joel - what is so memorable about him? Joel's context is a bit of a mystery. Unlike other prophetic texts that give contextual clues, such as the name of a king of Israel or Judah, or a well-documented political event, Joel only provides his and his father's names. This is a little book - only three chapters in length. It is a prophetic book.

First, we note that the prophet seems to be steeped in Yahwistic traditions, citing traditional texts and using traditional ideas, such as that of the "day of the Lord". At various points in the text, the writer hopes for a renewal of ritual associated with temple worship.

Not far into the first chapter, we discover that the text is quite unsettling. Parts of it are like watching a dystopian movie where some kind of threat swarms over a city and leaves a path of destruction in its wake. Instead of cyborgs, robots or zombies that we might expect in a movie, an invading nation wreaks havoc in the land.

The locust plague supposedly lasted for several years. The story begins with a potent description of a plague of locusts and the results of their relentless assault on the fields and trees of the land, followed by a dismal cry to Yahweh for relief through fasting, weeping, and mourning, and concludes with God's rich response to their pleas, making their land once again fertile and abundant, with some important theology thrown in- between.

The opening chapter sets the backdrop for the story, as we imagine seeing, hearing and feeling the locusts swarming, tearing up crops, and being devastating pests as they move through each stage of their existence. "After the cutting locusts finished eating the crops, the swarming locusts took what was left! After them

came the hopping locusts, and then the stripping locusts, too!” When locusts hatch and swarm, they can be as dense as four to five thousand insects per square metre. They strip all green foliage, destroying crops and trees. As a consequence, the wine is gone, bark is stripped from the vine, the temple grain and drink offerings are gone; fields ruined; vines destroyed; fig trees withered; fruit trees dried up, cattle mourn, herds have no pasture, sheep suffer, streams dried up. Locusts are often referred to as grasshoppers on steroids.

It’s unclear whether Joel really has an insect infestation in mind or simply uses the image of locusts as a metaphor for the armies of one enemy or another. So Joel is probably responding to a military crisis as he warns of a mighty but unidentified army that threatens Judah. The result of the attack will be so horrible that it will affect the universe - the universe as they know it. While this is most likely a metaphoric description of the invading locusts, it drives home the destructive capability of the invaders - whoever they may be. Judah has already been invaded by the Assyrians, held captive by the Babylonians, then invaded by the Medo-Persians.

The warning fanned the rumour mill about what would happen if an invading army of soldiers also entered the city, since Judah definitely had its enemies. The locusts have come, but the total damage they have wrought is still unknown; much more pain is to come from these relentless warriors. As they are reeling from all of this, everyone is knocked off their feet when Joel announces who leads this army that has invaded - it is the Lord who “thunders at the head of his army”. How shocking! How unexpected!

After Joel’s graphic pronouncement of devastation, an equally graphic call for repentance is made by God: “Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning.” This is a three-pronged

complete return. Fast so that your body and mind are focussed on God; weep because you realize the level of your failure before God; and mourn because of the magnitude of your grief over your state of being. In other words, with all of your being, return to God.

Unlike other prophets, Joel did not emphasize repentance as turning away from evil and turning toward a life of justice. Rather, Joel emphasized repentance as turning to God in worship. Joel does not focus on justice, name specific sins, or single out specific people or castes of people for their sins. Rather, Joel bids the people to turn toward God in repentance and worship. Joel used the term “day of the Lord” not to refer to the end of time, but to the time when God would act within history. The term “end of time” was originally used to refer to the Lord’s feast days.

As we consider a return to God, it’s not a matter of having totally left God. The result too often is that destruction follows us, our family, our community and the nation. In times of distress, people are apt to ask, “Where is God in all of this?” Or “Why is God allowing all of this?” Of course God is where God has always been - “keeping watch over God’s world.” As for the why, we know not why.

None of us are omniscient. But we do know that God has a permissive will. God permitted the locusts or invading armies that wreaked havoc on Judah. This is not to say that God desired our economic crash. It is not God’s desire that people lose their homes, jobs and sanity. However, God will not stop us from engaging in the behaviours that cause our ruin unless we want to be stopped. From “hedge fund heathens”, to “in-it-for-the-profits-not-the-people politicians”, to “John and Jane Public who sit by and say ‘We can’t change it’”, all of us contribute to this nation’s failure to truly return to God. Even the Church is guilty through acts of omission and commission of maintaining the status quo.

True return to God begins in our hearts and minds and migrates to our hands and our feet. There is a song that says: "I got it in my walk. I got it in my talk. I got it in my feet. I got it all over me." This means that the moves we make are all made with returning to God in mind. The causes we support are supported with this in mind. The things we buy, the way we treat others, all should be done with this in mind.

Nursing infants, children, elders, the newly married, everyone is told that they are included in this call to return to God. Even the priests are told to go to the area where they perform their work "between the altar and the temple porch" and weep. For the Jews, there was no division between the secular world and religious world. The priests ruled both. So, they are to ask God to spare the people and help them avoid being embarrassed in front of their enemies. This is still the role of those who are called to intercede for God's people; as these men and women enter their praying ground, they weep for God's people and God's world, and seek the mercy of God.

How much do we need this today? The need is so great one can scarcely articulate it. Yes, great sermons are needed. Yes, marching and advocacy in the public square are needed. Yes, the sacraments and Bible study are needed. But, in addition to all of that, for such a time as this, we need weeping spiritual leaders who will seek God's forgiveness, direction and mercy for God's people.

"Don't tear your clothing in your grief," Joel tells them. It was customary for people to rip their garments as a sign of grief for sins committed. The display was intended to be public, graphic and demonstrative to indicate the level of sorrow felt by the one who had sinned. The Bible is filled with people who tear their clothing and even cover themselves with sackcloth, Job being a great example of this.

Joel is saying that traditional outward signs of lament - the tearing of clothes and the scattering of dirt on the head, will no longer work. These people and we, need nothing less than a tearing of the heart, a remaking of our wills, if we are to truly repent. And if we do that, we can be assured that a wondrous God is ready to receive us once again. Joel turns to one of the Hebrew Bible's most glorious and memorable description of Yahweh, first uttered on Mt. Sinai at Exodus. "Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He is eager to relent and not punish."

Keep your clothes on; God sees past the outer appearance; instead fully open your heart to God. In other words, be clear that sacramental rituals, annual observances, celebration of high holy days, will never take the place of true and humble repentance before God. God personally appeals to Judah and to us to open our hearts to God.

Opening our hearts to God becomes increasingly more difficult as our hearts become saturated with all of the trappings of the world. We cannot hear God in meditation, because our ears and our minds are filled with iPods, Face Book, cell phones, cable TV and all manner of sound and noise. We cannot hear God through the Word, because we are saturated with other words to which we have turned for direction and wisdom: the words of self-help books; the words of TV hosts and analysts; the words of other media; and even the words of religious personalities which we have placed on a throne that should be reserved for God. Opening our hearts to God leads to true repentance which puts us in right relationship with God. That's what God is always after - a genuine closer relationship with us.

But what does Joel believe will be the result of people turning their hearts back to God? To answer this we need to look at Joel's description of the nature of God

(gracious, merciful, slow to anger, filled with unfailing love and one who relents from punishing.) This is a God who loves at a depth and with consistency that we cannot match. But hallelujah! We are the recipients of this love.

If a people genuinely repent in the attempt to align their lives with God, that loving and compassionate God will receive them, and all the nations will know beyond a doubt that this God is alive and well and active among the people. This is why Joel has a firm belief that God will deliver the people of God, and it will rain. Yes, rain. Judah has been crippled by an agricultural drought sent by God through locusts. So, they need real physical rain. However, they and we need spiritual rain much more. This is the greatest gift that we can receive in spite of all of our other perceived needs. Joel believed that spiritual rain - drops of grace - would begin in Judah and then extend to "all flesh " - all of God's people throughout the world.

Sometime after God has heard the wailing, fasting, and mourning of the people, God responds with "fall and spring rains", with "threshing floors that will again be piled high with grain, and the presses will overflow with new wine and olive oil". The years of the plagues of Locusts have ended. Yahweh's "great destroying army" is gone. After the years of the "locusts", the enemy armies end. Yahweh is now in Israel's midst.

"Then, after doing all those things, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants - men and women alike." These words bore such resonance for the people that they were remembered and repeated by Peter in his Pentecost sermon hundreds of years later.

The universality of the gift of God's spirit on all regardless of social stature,

regardless of the privilege of age or gender is an amazing vision. The vision also indicates that the traditional hierarchies of power are destroyed. This reminds us of Paul's letter to Galatians where in Christ there is no longer "Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female". All barriers between classes and races and genders are removed - God is equally open to all. Luke, in Peter's sermon, believes Joel's vision has come to pass at Pentecost.

The prophet, Joel, is well known for his announcement of God's promise to pour out God's spirit on all flesh. This prophecy became the Christian Pentecost and remains the vision of true evangelism. The church preaches the gospel in the hope that the spirit will come and stir up the gifts of faith, empowering all of God's people, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, with an active vision of the coming kingdom. One's entire life becomes transformed, both inwardly and outwardly. It's not simply a matter of belief alone; it is a matter of action, a matter of behaviour.

The all important test since the ancient days of the Hebrews is based on this: "Love Yahweh your God with all your life, with all your strength, with all your will", and "Love your neighbour as you love yourself." In this we find our hope, our freedom from despair, our promise for a future where God reigns in our lives.

The locust plagues and the fall of Jerusalem - whether natural or human engineered disasters - God restores and provides for God's people and their animals in response to repentance and turning back to God in prayer. Can we ask the same when we have polluted the oceans? Will God hear and heal our waters, coasts, and their wildlife if we all - child and adult, strong and weak, male and female, clergy and lay, fast and pray? God does hear prayer, and does respond to prayers as was evident by his response to Daniel's prayer last week.

Lament, prayer, fasting and confession - all witness to the faithful response to natural and unnatural disasters. The beloved community is called to respond to the needs of the earth, her people, and creatures by turning to our God.

The restoration of agriculture was accomplished by more than an Act of God. The people cleared, planted, harvested the fields, vineyards and orchards. This is important to remember lest we think that all we are called to do is to close ourselves up in our temples and pray. We also need to work with God in and on the earth and support each other in our work for God's creation and God's kingdom.

The book of Joel models a faithful response to uncertainty, fear, and chaos all around, by gathering as a community for worship, prayer, fasting, and turning with our whole heart to God. God has been a stronghold and a fortress in the past. God turned, relented, and delivered on his promise with his beloved son.

Jesus becomes Joel's prophecy made flesh. *You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord am your God and there is no other.* When Christ comes into our hearts by faith, we encounter the fullness of God's presence in the world, and we receive the same promise that: *Afterward I will pass out my spirit on all flesh.*

First God demands repentance and turning our hearts back to God. This is followed by an age of popular access to divine will through the empowering of the spirit of God. When these two connect, we are moved from challenge to promise. Joel proclaims hope to the people then - and to the people, communities and nations today - all who desperately need it more than ever - especially during Advent - our time of promise and hope.

Amen.

PRAYERS of the People
Second Sunday in Advent -- DECEMBER 8, 2024

In this season of Advent as we joyfully await the glorious coming of the Christ, let us pray for the needs of the church, our community, and the world.

Your dawn from on high breaks upon us. Prepare the earth itself for your coming, that the valleys, the mountains, and the wilderness might sing your praises. Establish harmony in all creation, that all living things may work according to your loving and generous purposes. Fill the earth with your goodness and glory.

Strengthen your church that we might remain faithful witnesses of your everlasting love. In this advent season may we eagerly share the good news of your love come down to live with us as an infant, your beloved Son, Jesus. May we, along with all Creation, sing praises and worship you now and every day of our lives, until you come again at the end of time.

We pray for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, acting Anglican Primate Anne Germond, our sister congregation in Peru and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, our synod councils, Chetwynd Shared Ministry in Chetwynd, Christ Lutheran in Chilliwack - Rev. Dean Andersen, all pastors, deacons, lay leaders, musicians and volunteers. We pray for the congregation of The Place as they prepare to relocate to their future place of worship.

Send your Spirit to those who hold power and authority among the nations. Lead them to tend to the needs of those who are vulnerable, poor, forgotten and suffering. May their actions reflect your grace, righteousness and justice. May all the nations be knit together by your justice, mercy, and forgiveness.

You are full of tender compassion. You give light to those who sit in darkness. You rekindle hope when despair and suffering have snuffed out a way forward. You come to your people and are present in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. We lift up those without homes or jobs, those who are still recovering from the many natural disasters that damaged homes, tore apart communities and stripped away livelihoods; those who are dying, those who mourn; those who are estranged or are away from loved ones; those who long for forgiveness; those whose days are bleak in the face of depression; those struggling with addictions; the sick and suffering. We pray especially for Pr. Kristin Steele and Jean McKain and all people in care. We name aloud or in the silence of our hearts those who especially need your healing presence (...) By your word and your people, encourage and give heart to those who have lost hope. Bring your comforting presence and give them faith in your eternal promises.

Through the birth, life, death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus, you have restored our relationship with you and redeemed us and set us free from the burden of our sins. Through our baptism your Holy Spirit seals us with an unwavering love that assures us that we are claimed as your beloved, and you are forever our compassionate and loving God. Let us live all year long as Easter people, free to participate with you in bringing your kin-dom near through our actions and words. As we are strengthened and sent out from this gathering, help us embody your way in our daily lives.

Shape this faith community into a place of welcome and support for all people. Feed and strengthen us by your gifts of grace, that we may generously share them with others.

You have gathered the saints into your holy and eternal presence. We give thanks for their faithful lives. Make us steadfast in our faith until we are all made one in your new creation.

Advent God, we yearn for a world of peace, where weapons of destruction are forever put down, where your vision of shalom, of wholeness and well-being for all humankind and your Creation, is such a compelling vision that all our efforts, and all our resources are channelled towards peacemaking, not war. Our plea this Christmas is for breakthroughs in peacekeeping efforts so that the violence and wars in the middle East, in Ukraine, in Sudan, in Haiti, and all places of war and conflict throughout the world end.

Hear our humble prayers that we may serve you in holiness and faithfulness, and give voice to your presence among us until the day of the coming again of your Son, Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Amen.

With joy and gladness let us pray as Jesus taught us...

Our Father ...