

Sermon: October 23, 2022. Joel 2: 23-32

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

What do you do, after a wide-sweeping catastrophe has made life difficult for just about everyone in your nation? How do you encourage the young and old alike to not lose hope, or to build their hopes on fantasies of past days returning?

No, I'm not reading from the playbook of the past two and a half years, I'm referring to the challenge facing the prophet, Joel.

The book of Joel – a little three-chapter book toward the end of the Hebrew Scriptures - would be a lot easier to interpret if we had an accurate idea of when it was written, and in response to what. Was it written before the first exile to Assyria had begun, a time of impending disaster? Was it written after the second exile to Babylonia had ended, a time of return tinged with disillusionment? It could change how we hear Joel's words, but we just don't know. (cf. Craigie, pp. 85-86)

Perhaps the bigger issue, is referenced in today's reading. Joel talks, at length, about a plague of locusts that had decimated the crops. And again there are questions: was this an actual agricultural event, with crops consumed by insects, or was this an allegory for military actions against Judah, wave upon wave of troops resembling wave upon wave of locusts? Or was it an apocalyptic vision of end times? Bible commentators have suggested all three.

And while I went down that rabbit hole for a while this week, trying to find a definitive answer, the main thing I learned is that whatever the situation, we know that the people he was addressing are hurting. Whether it is an actual infestation of relentless, grasshopper-like insects, or waves of military attack that resembled a pestilence, or an anxious and hopeless worldview that could only be relieved by a view to end times, the resulting trauma was big and widespread. Whatever the situation, Joel uses an image of environmental catastrophe, a grainfield nearly stripped bare by a first wave of locusts, then being attacked a second time and a third time, again and again until there was no grain to make bread and no feed to give the livestock. It reads like Joel was most likely describing an actual crop failure, not just using that as a metaphor, but whatever the circumstances, the level of trauma was heavy and widespread and whatever Joel says next into this situation of disorientation is crucial.

The people, physically and spiritually, are hungry. The people, physically and spiritually, have endured repeated attack. The people, physically and spiritually, are being forced to live life in a new way and it has them teetering on the edge. What will God give Joel to say in the midst of all this?

The hard-edged veteran American theologian Walter Brueggemann writes a daily blog, and this past Tuesday the title was "The Discomforting Gift of Newness." Referring to a book by Kurt Andersen entitled, *Evil Geniuses: The Unmaking of America: A Recent History* (2020), Brueggemann is going through eight claims that are creating such profound unrest and rebelliousness in the US right now, looking at how they apply to the American context in 2022 and to the context of the Israelites and Judeans some 2500 years ago. The claim he wrote about on Tuesday, is "belief in our perfect mythical yesteryear." This claim, Brueggemann writes, "is the wish or hope to escape a present social reality into an imagined past that was found to be more congenial and less demanding. Such an exercise in nostalgia is highly selective about the past, with a capacity to forget or deny the many liabilities of that past for the sake of a pretend world".

He goes on to say that such escapist nostalgia was well-known in ancient Judah, so prophets like Joel had to deal not only with the actual hardships being borne by the people, but also the distraction of this conveniently-flawed nostalgia. In situations like this, in Brueggemann's words, the task of the prophet is to call people "to relinquish that imagined past. It is time to notice that YHWH is making a new world before their eyes; and they are bid by God to accept and live into that future, even if it requires that they will not have such pre-eminence and influence in the newly emerging social scene. The [people] are urged to face up to the new reality".

That call to living into the new future reality is pretty much what Joel conveyed to the people, in the reading Ruben shared with us this morning. As one who, like his people, has endured tremendously stressful times, as one well-aware of the needs of the oppressed and the misaligned aspirations of those who just wanted things to be nice again, Joel knew that the people needed encouragement without running away from the realities, and was given this holy message of hope to share with the people:

²⁸ "I will pour out my Spirit on all kinds of people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.

²⁹ At that time I will pour out my Spirit also on male slaves and female slaves. ³⁰ I will show miracles in the sky and on the earth."

I cannot hear these words without immediately having singing in my head the final verse of Jim Manley's hymn, Spirit of Gentleness, as it memorably riffs on this passage in its fourth stanza:

"You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes.

From the bondage of sorrow, the captives dream dreams;

our women see visions, our men clear their eyes.

With bold new decisions your people arise".

(And yes, you may have noticed on your bulletin that we will sing this moving hymn, at the end of today's service).

And whether it's the prophet Joel's original words, or the version quoted by the Apostle Paul at the first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2: 16-21) or Jim Manley's lyrical paraphrase, the wisdom offered is the same: in unsettled and unsettling times, we must dare to dream. We must engage the holy gift of imagination, to see beyond the way things are, to seek the just and healthy ways of the Divine.

I need us to hear that call in our time and place: God's call, issued at least 2400 years ago through the prophet Joel, now urges us to be creative.

- ❖ Be creative in hearing and responding to community needs,
- ❖ be creative in the diverse ways that our new amalgamated congregation enacts Christ's love,
- ❖ be creative in solving our current financial deficit and mobilizing ourselves for inclusion and mission,
- ❖ be creative in responding to the environmental realities of *our* time,
- ❖ be creative in how we learn and grow together as a multi-generational multi-cultural truly affirming family of faith,

- ❖ In all this, we recall that the first quality of God described in the Bible (Genesis 1) is creativity. It is our task as Church in 2022 to be creative in believing and demonstrating that the Good News of a God who is completely invested in our lives is not some quaint, expired notion from days gone by.

God is dynamic and creative and amazing and we are called, as children, as siblings, as co-creators, to work from our most creative selves as well. As in Joel's day, there are a lot of things wrong in the world around us, so many people living in unsafe, insecure situations, deep inequality between households and between nations, historic wrongs that do need to be addressed, widespread uncertainty as to what comes next in a world that includes COVID. And as Aurora Borin told us at Canmore Pride last month, we can count on there being people and forces in this world that don't want dreamers to dream, because creative imagination is a very powerful tool for change. Today, we are called to courageously open ourselves to God's vision of a world where everyone is valued, everyone's needs are met, where human-created differences no longer give advantage to some at the detriment of others.

Admittedly, there are some challenging verses in today's passage – the divine restitution implied for those who had been hit hard by the locusts, the end times language that has since then been applied to various storms or weather events in a "this is it!" manner, and the language of judgment, drawing a dividing line between those who are wise enough to be saved and those who are not. My sense for all of these, is they express the critical situation they were in and the anxiety attending that: for them, the time for action was now. Things were dire, and their change in heart was urgent.

Joel, with full acknowledgement of how hard things have been, conveys a promise from God of new ways that will surprise us, and inherent in the promise is that this openness to the new and the unknown won't just be a gift bestowed upon the usual suspects – the landowners and the learned and the males of a certain age. In his words, Joel explicitly says that the unfolding of God's vision will include the children and the elders, the men and the women, the free and those presently enslaved. Nobody is left out.

So for us that means that no matter what your education level, your income, your life circumstances, you're in. No matter what your ethnicity, your gender expression, your personality, you're in. In a time when many of Joel's people were traumatized, in a time when hope was beyond imagination, everyone – everyone – was invited to dream God's unfolding miracle, a way of equity and wholeness.

In the midst of cruel, difficult times, Joel did not hide behind old, worn-out platitudes. He didn't downplay how hard things had been, in fact if you read the entire book of Joel – which takes about five minutes, it's such a short book – you'll be struck at how much detail he gets into to enumerate just how challenging things have been for everyone. And he doesn't buy into the lie of the "perfect mythical yesteryear." Joel invites and empowers all listeners, to forward motion and new possibilities, our creativity meeting God's creativity, our imagination meeting God's imagination, our desire for a world more just meeting God's holy impulse for justice.

"Our women see visions, our men clear their eyes; with bold new decisions, your people arise." May this be so. Amen.

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