



WHAT WOULD JOEL SAY?

August 28, 2016, The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Joel 2:23-32

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God of ancient truths, Your Word comes to us from voices long ago, yet Your Spirit continues to move. You create us, refine us, inspire us, and call us to faithfulness. With your Holy fire, enliven us again that we may hear your Word in these ancient texts. Place your call of prophet upon each of us that we may speak, not for ourselves, but for you. Burn away our indifference and complacency and inspire us to act for you. In this space, quiet our minds and focus our intention on your Gospel. We are listening, holy Lord. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

These past four weeks, we've been listening to the voices of the Old Testament prophets thinking through how they speak to us in our own time and context. As I mentioned in the beginning of this series, it was the prophets' call to speak truth to culture, to bring God's Word into the realities of the day. The prophets are the ones who come to get the people of God back on track.

One thing I should make clear about this group is that the prophets are not a group of fortune-tellers who are reading God-inspired crystal balls, predicting the future. Rather than fortune telling, they are *forth telling*. The prophets come on the scene demanding that folks open their eyes and see the present for what it is. They speak for God, preaching directly into a specific culture and time. Because they are forth tellers rather than fortune-tellers, they can open our eyes today.

Because of this unique calling, the prophets are not usually popular with their audiences. They made Israel name her mistakes and admit where she was unfaithful. Most likely, the prophets would still be unpopular today, because saying "I'm sorry" doesn't come easy for any of us.



Into this reality enters the prophet Joel. Joel is a prophet we have a hard time dating—every scholar I read this week gave a different year for Joel’s prophecy—anywhere between the 9th and 3rd centuries BCE. Because of that, Joel’s message was read and preached to Israel in a variety of contexts. Joel begins his sermon with one word: Repent. Not unlike the other minor prophets, Joel comes to remind Israel of her unfaithfulness. God’s people have found themselves within a number of difficult situations—exile, famine, being ruled by their enemies and, most specifically, in the middle of a locust plague. Joel tells the people that God is punishing them for their sin, and they are given a chance to repent and turn things around.

An important word to learn with the book of Joel is the word *apocalyptic*. Joel preaches in the style of a very specific type of Old Testament literature. It’s called apocalyptic, and it’s like beautiful poetry with a few hallucinations added in. Joking aside, it’s a type of literature filled with dramatic imagery and poetic metaphor. It’s the same type of writing you find with the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel and in the book of Revelation. Apocalyptic literature is a collection of visions that both foreshadow the future and also retell the present. You heard elements of it in our passage for today, “*The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.*”¹ Apocalyptic literature imagines a cosmic battle between the evils of the world and the goodness of God, filled with grand images, and God always wins.

The book of Joel has two main themes, repentance being the first. The second is the promise of God’s restoration. The prophets call this The Day of the Lord. On this day, God will restore all things—even the unfaithfulness of Israel. The realities of exile, famine, even a plague of locusts, cannot stop the power of God. One day all things will be made right. In his prophecy, Joel continually refers to this Day of the Lord with great excitement and hope; all will eventually be redeemed. If you remember, each of the prophets I’ve covered this month are imaged here in our sanctuary. If you follow behind me in our gold reredos artwork above the communion table, Joel is on the top row of the left side with the symbol of the

¹ Joel 2:31.



trumpet. With that trumpet Joel announces a future day when the Spirit will pour down upon all peoples and God's justice and mercy will reign.

At this point, I feel like I need to offer one caution with the prophet Joel. Joel very clearly takes Israel's current situation and makes the direct connection between it and God's punishment. He says, "this horrible reality you're facing right now—this is a direct result of God's displeasure with you." And Joel is not the only Old Testament voice to do this; this was a common way of thinking in ancient Jewish theology. We see it show up in Jesus ministry' in the healing of the blind man. Those around Jesus ask about the particular sin of the blind man that caused his blindness.² But Jesus points them in another direction, gives them something else to focus on—God's miraculous ability to heal.

But despite Jesus' redirection, in our own time, there are religious voices who see current tragedies in our world and try to make these same moves. These people say that God causes the tragedies in our lives, because of this Old Testament argument. But I think they're taking prophets like Joel out of context. Remember, Jesus redirected that kind of thinking. He tried to help the people around him—for lack of a better phrase—keep their eye on the ball. God does not rain down disease, earthquakes or personal tragedy in order to teach us something. God offers justice and mercy and healing.

Friends, Joel is a prophet that preaches both sides of the life of faith: repentance of sin but also God's restoration. He reminds us that life is both hardship and beauty, pain and pleasure. Our world is broken, but can always be redeemed by God. In this way, I think Joel offers us hope because he forces us to name and recognize what is broken in our lives, but promises us that God will redeem that brokenness and make things whole again.

In our lectionary the prophet Joel shows up on two of our more significant liturgical holidays. The first is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, the season in which we confess our sin in preparation for Easter. Joel, with his theme of

² John 9.



repentance, calls to us to atone for our sin. Marking ourselves with ash and dust, we hear Joel sound the alarm, preaching fire and repentance, and we prepare ourselves to receive the Easter gift.³

But, in a dramatic shift, Lent is not the only time we hear the voice of the prophet Joel. On the day of Pentecost, when all the nations gather and receive the Holy Spirit, the disciple Peter climbs in the pulpit to preach to the crowds. And what does he quote? The prophet Joel. You heard these words from David this morning: *I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.*⁴ At Pentecost the fiery presence of the Holy Spirit lands upon everyone, inspiring not just the prophets of old, but all God's people. So, from the beginning of Lent to the day of Pentecost, Joel comes to us to remind us that God desires our repentance so that we may use the gifts of the Spirit we've been given.

So what would Joel say to us today? Because he's a preacher of dramatic word pictures, I'm going to offer you an image I think Joel would give us. Joel shows up in our lectionary both on Ash Wednesday and Pentecost; he forms a bookend at holidays that use *fire* as their main metaphor. So, today Joel would deliver a message of fire to us: the destructive, refining, life-giving and cleansing presence of fire.

Think of the Bible stories that contain fire: Moses and the Burning Bush, the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness, Elijah being carried off by a fiery chariot, the flames of fire at Pentecost. Stories of fire are all throughout the Bible, from the sacrificial fires of the Old Testament to the baptism by fire from Jesus. Fire destroys, but fire also purifies. Fire can both inhibit and inspire growth. Fire gives us light and warmth, but fire can also engulf homes and bodies. Fire is "essential for life and civilization, and fire is a threat to both."⁵

³ Ash Wednesday lection for years A, B, and C is Joel 2:1-18.

⁴ Joel 2:28.

⁵ Winner, *Lauren Wearing God*, Doubleday, page 206.



Moreover, did you know that fire has the unique ability to produce growth? Even “fire’s very destructiveness is sometimes regenerative.”⁶ Often intentional fires are set to a forest to clear out weaker trees and allow for new growth underneath to flourish. Soil nourished by fire-burned vegetation is often more nutritious. Moreover, there are fire-dependent fir trees that need fire to grow, because only heat that intense can open their seeds from within the pinecones.

Then there is the fire that metal workers know. One scientist reminds us that “fire can tell the truth about an object’s composition... a chemist can tell what elements are present in a solution by the color flame it produces: sodium produces a yellow flame, potassium a lilac flame, lithium a lovely crimson, and barium an apple green.”⁷ Even Paul, back in 1 Corinthians, knew this truth, because he says that the fire of God will reveal the true work each of us has done in God’s name.⁸

So if you’re following the metaphor: fire inspires, grows, destroys, illumines, warms, threatens, purifies and reveals. The gifts of fire are one of the many reasons why Joel and other prophets offer it to us as an image of God’s love. Because, what if we are like that underbrush, who need to be cleansed by fire to bring forth new growth? What if we are like that pinecone, who needs the heat of fire to bring forth life? What if we are like those metals that the scientist exposes to the flame, revealing our true nature? If God’s love is like fire, it will change and refine us.

So then, friends, what would Joel say to us today? The prophet Joel proclaims that the fire of God comes both to purify and to inspire us to change. Remember, the prophets of old had a calling that continues today—each of us is called to speak for God and follow Christ’s ministry of love, peace and justice. If Joel were here with us today, perhaps he wouldn’t actually tell us something about any one particular

⁶ Winner, 210.

⁷ From Hazel Rossotti’s book *Fire* quoted by Lauren Winner in *Wearing God*, page 216-17.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 3:10-13.



area of our lives. He would instead offer us the opportunity for honest, fiery self-examination—causing us to pause and consider where God may be calling us. What does God see when the light of God’s fire shines on each of us? When the flame of God touches us, friends, how will we respond?

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.