

“The Steadfast Love of God”
August 14, 2022

Joel 2:12-27
Romans 8:31-39

Last Sunday I started a late summer sermon series that will explore some of the major concerns of the minor prophets—those twelve books at the end of the Hebrew Scriptures. I invite you to be a part of this by reading through one of those prophets each week in preparation for the coming Sunday. So this week, take a look at Amos.

If you read through the three chapters of the Book of Joel this past week, you listened with the prophet in the first chapter as, from a distance, comes the low hum of destruction. He watches as locusts arrive like an invading army, a powerful nation that lays everything to waste:

A nation has invaded my land,
powerful and innumerable;
its teeth are lions’ teeth,
and it has the fangs of a lioness.
It has laid waste my vines,
and splintered my fig trees;
it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;
their branches have turned white.

With Joel, we see a picture of utter devastation. The people stand vulnerable and helpless.

This invasion, this plague, appeared to Joel as nothing less than the judgment of God.

We, too, know disaster. In ways we never imagined, we, too, have become familiar with plague. But we are reluctant see God’s judgment in any of this. We’re much too sophisticated for that. The Presbyterians have a prayer for use when there is a natural disaster; it implores God: “Keep us from calling disaster your justice.” That seems sensible, civil.

When prophets talk of God’s judgment and God’s justice—the one word in Hebrew is translated both ways—they are speaking both of God’s rule over all creation and of God’s desire for right relationships among us human beings, created in God’s image.

So—and bear with me here—might there not be *some* element of judgment, *some* call to justice, when we experience deadly storms and catastrophic flooding because of the changes we human being are bringing to our global climate?

Might the judgment of God and God’s call to justice be seen and heard in the growing violence in our nation as inequality in so many ways keeps us from seeing the image of God in one another?

And do we not know the swarming, hopping, cutting, destroying locusts of fear, anger, suspicion, hatred, and revenge that have eaten away at our nation and our fragile democracy?

One disaster seems to follow after another, wave upon wave. We have not yet recovered from one tragedy before another cries for our attention and calls out our grief. With Joel we watch:

What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten.

One step at a time, the earth slowly but inexorably warms.

One step at a time, violence becomes commonplace, shrugged off, if not accepted.

One step at a time, democracy and the rule of law are eroded.

When do we reach the point of no return?

Along with a vision of devastation, Joel invites us to turn, to begin anew. T.S. Eliot told us: “In the end is my beginning,” and we hope that might be the case.

The poster tells us “When you’ve reached the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.” Many have, only to ask “How long? How long?”

When we come to an end, we need something more than a knot. We need new strength that will sustain, a new vision that will move us forward, a renewed spirit that can face the coming day.

Even now, Joel says, even now, return to God.

Even now, even in these difficult days, gather up the pieces of your life: what has been lost and what has been gained, the reality of what you are and the dream of what you would be. Even now, even in these difficult days, gather up the pieces of this city, this nation, this world.

Head in a new direction, toward the God who is waiting still.

And who is this God?

The prophet Joel describes the Holy One in terms that speak to our troubled hearts:

gracious—a word that speaks of total good will;
merciful—having the same love toward us that a mother has for her child;

slow to anger—one who waits patiently for a change of heart rather than rushing to punish;
 abounding in steadfast love—possessing a deep and eternal compassion for all people, indeed, for all creation.

“Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Those words are an ancient affirmation found several times in the Hebrew Scriptures. We read them in the psalm this morning. As we move through the Minor Prophets, we will hear this affirmation repeated by Jonah and Nahum. This abiding faith *does* keep us from calling natural disasters God’s justice. This abiding faith helps us to move forward even when we are walking over devastated ground.

Faith, of course, is not the same thing as certainty.

As we listen, the prophet sounds a note of uncertainty: “Who knows?” the prophet adds. *Maybe* God will turn toward us. *Maybe*.

The Holy One is not under our control. We trust in the God of steadfast love, but we in no way control God.

And yet, even as we listen to Joel’s uncertainty we hear still another voice. It is the voice of the gracious and merciful God: “I will repay you.” I owe you one.

Beyond destruction, we hear of the restoration that God will bring:

I will repay you for the years
 that the swarming locust has eaten,
 the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter...
 You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
 and praise the name of the Lord your God...
 And my people shall never again be put to shame.

These are words spoken to people who suffered an incredible disaster. We can recognize this as a description of our lives as well: devastated relationships, dreams and ambitions that have been cut down, values and principles threatened and compromised. We can recognize this as description of the world that we have brought upon ourselves.

In difficult times, the temptation is to descend into despair, to succumb to bitterness, to let a materialistic view of life lead to anger or hopelessness.

In faith, however, we claim that even in the greatest adversity, when “judgment” seems a fitting way to speak of events, when God seems silent or absent, God is still at work in the world and in our lives. Our world moves toward death and despair, but *even now* we can turn in the direction of life and hope.

Joel’s vision of renewal and restoration is universal—the soil will be glad and rejoice, the grass and plants will be restored, the animals will not fear, and the people, like the very ground from which they come and to which they will go, will also be glad and rejoice.

If we can grasp this vision, perhaps we can also listen along with those ancient people and hear as the God of steadfast love says not once but twice: “And my people shall never again be put to shame.”

Guilt is no longer our problem as it was for people in the Middle Ages. We know how to handle guilt.

Our problem is shame.

Shame flattens us. Shame tells us to worry about what other people might think. In the midst of devastation, the other nations asked of Judah, of God’s people: “Where is their God?”

If shame flattens us, salvation is the ability to stand up, to live dimensionally again.

To people who are devastated, broken, weary comes the promise: “You shall never again be put to shame.” God is in your midst.

Rise once more, the prophet says. Move forward with confidence.

Even now, lift up your eyes and look! What signs of hope are you able to see—if only in what might seem to be the distance? What steps can you take to move closer to that hope?

Move toward God’s future when we will once again be filled and satisfied.