

“Finding Strength in Uncertain Times”
March 23, 2025

Joel 2:12-14
Luke 13:1-9

Charles Kenny, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development who has explored the ongoing effect of pandemics, wrote recently that “the aftershocks of pandemics can linger for far longer than five years. Signs suggest our global economy and politics are suffering their own form of long Covid, and we may still be in the chaos phase of a pandemic cycle.” He pointed to the link between pandemics and increased support for conformity and authoritarianism, shown in global surveys suggesting a decline in support for representative democracy. There is also a lower sense of trust in the medical establishment, seen in our own nation’s health system now being overseen by a leading vaccine skeptic. Kenny concluded by saying: “History shows us we can salvage something from the wreckage of a pandemic if we choose — that is, if we don’t remain befuddled by Covid fog.”^{vi}

In the aftermath of the pandemic, with tariffs on and off, the stock market down and up, when, as the old song said in a different time, the old “order is rapidly fading,” we look for strength in uncertain times.

And here’s the thing—times are always uncertain.

Yes, we are living through our own particular uncertainties right now—and some days seem more uncertain than others. “The wheel is still in spin,” the old song also told us.

The words of the prophet, Joel, suggest our motto for our days: “Who knows?”

“Who knows.”

These words allow us to embrace the uncertainty of these days even as they encourage us to act in hope.

In the first chapter of Joel, we listen with the prophet as, from a distance, comes the low hum of destruction. Together, we watch 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.

We see a picture of utter devastation. In that ancient uncertain time, the people stand vulnerable and helpless as everything they have known, everything they counted on, seems to vanish before their eyes.

In our own uncertain times, we know the swarming, hopping, cutting, destroying locusts of fear, anger, suspicion, hatred, and revenge that are eating away at our nation and our ever more fragile democracy.

In our nation and globally, one disaster seems to follow another, wave upon wave. We have not yet recovered from one tragedy before another cries for our attention and calls forth our grief.

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?

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.

Listen. Along with a vision of devastation, Joel invites us, not simply to hang on, but to turn, to begin anew.

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 once more, even now, toward the God who is waiting still.

If we accept this invitation, what will come?

The prophet reminds us of uncertainty: “Who knows?” *Maybe* God will turn toward us. *Maybe*.

After all, this is the God to whom we turn:

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.

Who knows?

We trust in the God of steadfast love, but we in no way control God.

We cannot be certain.

And it is just in our uncertainty that we begin to find strength.

So it is that the late Krister Stendahl suggested that we should invoke the Spirit when we are uncertain, when we do not know, when we are facing new situations.ⁱⁱ This, I would add, means that we should be invoking the Spirit—affirming God’s presence with us—quite a lot in these days.

There is so much that we don’t know. In a time like our own, when new challenges seem to present themselves every day, when old answers—even last year’s answers—have stopped making sense, it is important to cultivate an awareness that, who knows (?) *just at this time* God’s Spirit might be at work in us and among us and through us—strengthening us to seek the common good, to love our neighbor in whom we see the image of God, to pursue justice, which, it is said, is what love looks like in public.

The Spirit comes when we *don’t* know what to say, when we are at a loss for the right words. When the forces around us would silence or accuse, the Spirit comes to give voice and to advocate for God’s new creation.

With this possibility in mind, remember that story about the fig tree.

As with the other parables that Jesus told, this one is rooted in everyday life. Vineyards were plentiful in ancient Israel and were often planted with fig trees growing among the vines. There was nothing unusual about someone planting in this way.

The problem with fig trees, however, is that they absorb an especially large amount of nourishment from the soil. They begin to rob the vines of sustenance over time. Of course, this isn’t a major problem as long as the tree bears fruit.

Now, this particular fig tree had been there for about six years, growing in the sun, drawing nourishment from the soil, putting out leaves—but producing no fruit. No one expected the tree to bear fruit for the first three years after it was planted. But three more years passed—and still no figs!

The natural response would be: “Cut it down!” It’s one thing for a tree to take up the nutrients if it is bearing fruit; it’s something else altogether when you don’t get one fig for all those years. “Cut it down!”

Harsh words—even if they make good sense.

And yet, by faith we hear something more, something filled with grace.

The gardener replies to the demand to cut down the tree with a request: leave the tree alone for one more year. Let me dig around it, loosening the soil, providing more nourishment to the roots. Then we’ll see if next year it produces fruit.

Who knows?

Those words exhibit a sense of mercy that we desire for our lives and in our world.

What student is not relieved when her request for more time to finish a paper is granted?

Who does not rejoice when he learns that the financial report due on Friday won’t be needed until Monday?

We would like to receive mercy and show such mercy. We would like to receive grace and give such grace.

Then just as we begin to breathe a sigh of relief, Jesus ends the parable with the gardener agreeing—then adding “If it still doesn’t produce fruit, you can cut it down.”

You can cut it down.

That is to say, the paper better be finished within a week; the report better be in the office on Monday morning. Or else...

Cut it down.

Listen carefully to Jesus. Somewhere in our souls we hear in this troubling parable, not just harshness, but life-giving strength and hope in for our uncertain times.

We don’t have all the time in the world. We each have only 24 hours in a day. And no one has any way of knowing when those days will end.

By telling of a “deadline” Jesus doesn’t string us along. We don’t hear: “Everything’s all right. Keep on as unhappy, as unproductive as you are. It doesn’t matter.”

You see, it does matter. And somewhere deep inside maybe that’s the truth that you have been waiting to hear.

God desires that our lives bear fruit—things like love, joy, peace.

The tree is given one more year—a year of forgiveness, restoration, and nurture.

What we do, how we act, does matter—even in uncertain times, *especially* in uncertain times. Each day we are given the choice—to tear down or build up, to complain or to encourage, to welcome or to turn away. The choices we make, the actions we take will determine whether or not our lives bear fruit in the world.

Who knows?

The lesson of the fig tree is a challenge to live each day as a gift from God.

And yes, let us never forget that God is patient, forgiving, understanding. But God’s mercy stands out more clearly when seen in relief against God’s judgment. The announcement of judgment “Cut it down!” can also be heard as a grace-filled invitation to turn in a new direction, an offer to renew your life, to restore your soul.

Uncertain times strengthen us for certain action.

Because we always live in uncertain times, Christians are people of hope. Our peculiar symbol is the cross—an instrument of death that, seen through the eyes of faith, tells of life. One person put it like this: “The cross tells us that nothing is ever beyond hope, that after pain comes healing...And how do we engender hope in others? By living as Jesus lived his life and as he taught us: by feeding and healing, by making peace and loving God and all of God’s creation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We might not know what will happen, but we do know what to do.

Let us, then, in these uncertain days, continue with certainty to:

work for interfaith understanding, cooperation, and acceptance,
 include all people in the life of our nation as we do in the life of our congregation,
 strive to overcome the hatred that clings so closely,
 speak the truth about the reality of climate change before it's too late—and time is
 running out,
 pursue paths of economic justice,
 live toward peace.

This is to say, let us live knowing and affirming what we believe about the God who strengthens, helps, and upholds us.

Not everyone will approve of such actions, such affirmation. I worry at times that we are moving closer to the day when that disapproval will be fierce and certain.

Let us not lose heart, let us not grow weary in doing what is right. Do not give up for Lent—find strength in these uncertain times.

ⁱ Charles Kenny, “We’re Relearning What Pandemics Do to a Society”
<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/11/opinion/pandemic-cycle-chaos.html>

ⁱⁱ Krister Stendahl, *Energy for Life*, pg. 43, 44.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Honorable Frederica Brenneman, Connecticut Conference Annual Meeting, 2003.