

This week's preaching text is just Joel 2:12-13, 28-29 but I encourage you to also read at least the opening four verses of the book.

Grace and peace be unto you from God our heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

I am guessing that many of you can recall this scene from the movie *Forrest Gump* starring Tom Hanks. While Forrest is running across the country, an old man (named "Aging Hippie" in the script) approaches and asks if Forrest could think of a good slogan for his new bumper sticker business. Just then, Forrest steps into a large pile of dog feces, which surprises the old man. Forrest reacts just by saying "It happens." And this of course inspires the phrase that I have a hunch you have seen for yourself a time or two on a bumper sticker. We often don't know how else to react when bad things happen for no reason at all, am I right?

This week I heard someone on the radio describe 2020 as "a dumpster fire of a year." I have also heard people conclude many a conversation on this year's pandemic with what may be our equivalent of "It happens" by using the phrase, "It is what it is." And, I have to say, I can relate to those kinds of statements on many days, because I too sometimes feel resigned to our present circumstances. Yet what we must remember is that the present does not define the future. While the present does serve to shape the future, it does not define it. What we are experiencing now is real, of that there can be no doubt. But as people of faith—faith in God who created all things—faith in God of the living and the dead, is that what is real is not final.

Picking up on these phrases, this week's preaching text from the book of Joel has a great deal to teach us in this last month of our dumpster fire year. I would encourage you to read it in its entirety, especially given that it is just three chapters and seventy-three verses. That said, this prophet like so many others has a name that is, in itself, a message, and a statement of belief. Joel literally means, "Yahweh is God."

Now the book starts out with Joel talking about the people's own dumpster fire of a year and he says, "Hear this, O elders, give ear all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors?" But what I found especially interesting is that rather than wanting to in a sense run from the calamity that they are experiencing or trying to rise above it or to forget about it, Joel says that the word of the Lord instructed him to say, "Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation." In other words, what I hear him saying is that since we are already in the thick of the mess, the "it," if you will, let's really deal with it. What can this crappy year teach us and our children?

"Tell your children" Joel says and "I love to tell the story" we sing, but what does it mean to be a "teller?" Well, for one, it means we must tell the truth. We don't want to be telling the children what is false and untrue nor do we want to base our own lives on lies, half-truths, or alternative facts. The truth here for Joel and his community was that there was a rural crisis. In Joel's time, the crisis came about from a plague of locusts. As a messenger of God, Joel doesn't attempt to fix the blame, his goal is to fix the problem.

Now for us and our time, we have rural crises that abound. The most obvious and local for us is the coronavirus pandemic which is bringing very serious illness and death in and throughout our community. But there's also the destruction from windstorms in Iowa this past summer (and just to our north a year ago), the devastating forest fires out West, the destruction from hurricanes in the South and the East, I mean if we are to act as "truth-tellers," we do not lack for crises affecting rural areas. And I would be remiss to not also bring up the opioid crisis or the affects of alcoholism and depression that has destroyed many rural families.

With all of this going on, what are we to do? What does Joel, as a truth-teller on God's behalf have to say? When we don't know where to turn, after a chapter and a half

describing the plague and lamenting it, we hear the verses that made up our reading, “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.” The actions of fasting, weeping, and rending our hearts call on us to demonstrate humility. We are being called to strip away our pretense, our masks, our arrogance, our *self-reliance*.

The call from Joel, whose name means *Yahweh is God* remember, is to return to the Lord, your God. Where else can we go? To whom else can we return? As we have sung so often before hearing the reading of the Gospel, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, Alleluia, alleluia.” And what Joel says next is again a statement of belief. Why return to the Lord, your God? Well, because God “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

And what follows immediately after this (but I did not read earlier) is also insightful. Joel asks, “Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him?” Once we have humbled ourselves through our repentance, we do not dare presume that God will do what we please as though it is something we have suddenly earned or we somehow now deserve God’s blessing. No, when we return to the Lord, it gives us wisdom that acknowledges that we are solely dependent on God. God is God and our repentance does not in any way force God’s hand. At the same time though, as Joel reminds God’s people then, we also know something of the character of God as being a God that is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Now the next move that Joel makes is also wonderfully instructive, he says, “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; *gather the people*.” What makes this so beautiful and needful is that we are being called to act together. “Assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.” This is *that* important. If we are going to get through

this crisis, we all need to pull together. What happens when we are together is that we feel consoled, it is not good to grieve alone, to live in isolation from one another. As we gather, we are encouraged. And thanks be to God, we see time and time again how God is also moved to respond. The Bible is full of examples but one that we recently recalled was how when Jonah spoke to the people of Nineveh, they responded and God acted. In fact, if you recall, God was so good to them that Jonah resented it and pouted that God showed so much mercy to his enemies.

Well, in the midst of our own crisis if we somehow don't see a need for repentance or we somehow feel we can continue to attempt to forge our own paths, well then, as they are prone to say in the south, "Well, bless your heart." In other words, "Ain't nothin' going to help you, child." On the other hand, when we heed the prophet's call to come together, to humble ourselves, to find our common center, where we place our ultimate trust, then we will likely experience that blessing that our gracious and forgiving God is ready to offer. And, as the prophet speaks of in the second portion of our reading, from chapter two, "Then afterward 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. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." This blessing is unequivocally for the entire community!

And that is what we are called to tell the children and the next generation and the ones after that. Tell the truth that "Yes, 'it' happens." Pandemics and tragic events and times of crisis are real, but not final. As the people of God we are called to also tell the truth that "Grace happens." When we return to the Lord our God, we will discover again and again that grace happens and it is always a gift and always amazing. Amen

Narrative.3 Joel 2:12-13, 28-29  
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