

March 26

Lesson 4: Joel 2: 12-13, 18-19, 28-32

God's Love Restored

Context:

The scripture lesson we read today is an Old Testament passage where the prophet Joel speaks to the people of Israel. Prophets were whistle blowers who would usually sound off when the people had veered from the paths they were supposed to be on. Joel is a minor prophet between the books of Hosea and Amos. Throughout the short book, Joel uses the phrase "Day of Yahweh" or "Day of the Lord." We never hear an exact date given but many scholars believe the book came during the Persian period between the fifth or fourth century BCE.¹ With the reference to the exile in chapter three, scholars believe that it also could have been written as the Temple is being rebuilt in the later fifth or sixth centuries.² Whatever the time frame the book falls in, it is one that follows the typical patten of ancient literature: a lament prompted by something with assurance of a divine deliverance and then an apocalyptic description of when Israel will be restored to its glory while enemies are punished.³ Even though it is short, it is full of imagery and powerful testimony.

In the text, we hear that Joel has come to blow the great trumpet of Zion to get the people to pay attention. The Day of the Lord is coming near. On this day the people to are to be fearful and apprehensive of an impending locust army that will come to invade them. The prophet Joel wants the people to repent, to see the error of their ways and return to God.

As such Joel calls all the people to assemble at a massive ceremony in Jerusalem and to fast, weep, rend their hearts, and gather to hear what God has planned for the people. As they do, they will feel God's mercy and grace and they will have abundant life as they turn back to God. They will have abundant crops and will become the nation they are called to be. The Spirit will come upon everyone and both young and old will feel God in their hearts and lives. Even so, they will still experience the Day of the Lord and things will happen like blood moons and an eclipsed sun. But the people who belong to God will be safe and Jerusalem will survive.

Application:

What an interesting passage to read with so many different images; some almost bizarre to imagine in our modern world! The second chapter of Joel is frequently used during Ash Wednesday services as Christians think of how they are called to repent and turn back to God for guidance and forgiveness in the season of Lent. Like the Israelites we are called to remember that we need to wake up to the places where we have failed and the places we could do a little better in our walk with Christ. Even though we are sinners and stumble, we are not excused from trying to be better and growing in Christ. We are to be reminded that we first and foremost belong to God and when we act, speak,

¹ Michael Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 436.

² *Ibid.*, 436.

³ *Ibid.*, 435.

and make decisions, they should reflect that we belong to God.

That is what happened for the Israelites thousands of years ago where they were reminded to return to God. It was not about performing the right rituals, praying the right prayer, or simply going through the motions. It was about them remembering that God was their only God and that they needed to give themselves back to God and owning the fact that they cannot do life on their own. Because God loved them so much, they were given a chance to be a renewed people. And God worked through them so that they had new life to carry on as they survived tragedy and disaster.

The same goes for us. We will face times when things happen and we ask why. Whatever we've done, whatever we've been through, whatever we may have failed or succeeded at in life, God is still God and is deeply in love with us. It is what we learn in the season of Lent as we think of ways that God is with us on our journey and how we are called to be his disciples. And no matter what we may face God is there with us and will be with us every step of the way.

To me this passage will always hold a special piece of my heart as I have a renewed perspective on Ash Wednesday where this passage is preached in most churches. Three Ash Wednesdays ago, my father died in a car accident as he was traveling back to his church to prepare for services that day. My family, the congregation he served, and numerous others were in shock and a place of deep sorrow. We saw people though leaning into their gifts and talents. Leaders in the church stepped up to help others lament, prayer warriors prayed diligently for our family, and countless others offered time and food to help us make it through the next few months. It did not take the loss away that still hurts, but we saw God working through countless others in a time that was unnerving, painful, and uncertain.

Lent for me since then has had such a different meaning. I now see it as a time to not only go through the Lenten disciplines or a time to "give something up," but as a time to think about if I am truly caring for others, spending more time with those that I love, and living into the vows and calling God has placed on my life. It is a time where I take stock and try to think of ways in which I have done good work and places that may need some work. And it is a time where I think about Jesus and how he showed us all how to live and love more deeply.

The words of Joel remind us all, old and young, clergy and lay, male and female, to gather together and confess that we need God and we need to get back on track. We are all broken and sinners, but we are given new life and we have God who promises resurrection. As we live into our callings and use the gifts we have given, we can bring hope to a hurting world and allow God to use us in powerful ways. May we remember that God is always with us and gives us what we need to be the disciples we are called to be.

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