

Here

A Sermon on Joel 2:23-29--By Rev. M. Ashley Grant Sunday, October 23, 2016 First United Church of Christ, Congregational of Milford

Here's God's Good News in Joel's prophetic word.
This is God talking!

"O Children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for God has given the early rain for your vindication, God has poured down for you abundant rain, the spring and the autumn rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, (I'm here!) and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Then afterward, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

Prayer: Pour, God. Pour. Amen.

A.

Where is God? That's what the people wonder.

If you are wondering where God is, then 1. You obviously believe in God; therefore God must be somewhere.

2. You aren't feeling God is too close, if you are asking.

Or, 3. You think that whatever is happening in your immediate situation would be different, **if** God were here. Since it is not, where is God?

Joel's community wonders where God is.

Michael Angelo depicted this Joel in the Sistine Chapel with mussed-up hair, slouching over a scroll, with young apprentices in the background. Which is strange; from what I read in this minor prophet's book, I had Joel pegged part farmer, entomologist, meteorologist, and a full-time worshiper of God. Maybe that scroll was the ancient Judean version of the Farmer's Almanac. Or maybe Joel's just editing the "Word" that God gave him to fit into this little book.

It's Joel's job to bring God's word to the people. It's not about Joel. **It's about God/for God's people.**

The people of Judah got it bad. You guys, they made it through the exile and all kinds of power upheavals, and they live with the threat of invasion. They are far from perfect, but aren't we all. They reestablished some normalcy in Judah, with an agrarian lifestyle that makes very little sense to many of us; we who harvest from grocery store produce bins; while our understanding of process from grain of wheat to loaf of bread is based on *The Little Red Hen* instead of experience.

Joel's community sank all of their resources into their land; land they had every reasonable expectation would produce: Vineyards, lush

pastures for sheep, fruit groves, and fields for the grain.

Then the plague of Locust arises. First, the cutting Locust, gobbled through the fields; which is bad, but not terminal—crops can potentially come back if the damage is minimal and timing right. Except, those cutting Locust developed into swarming locusts. Yep, people study this! The solitary locusts can develop into the gregarious, swarming version—grasshoppers on steroids! They multiply and multiply and multiply—I'm talking millions—like an online viral blunder. Each phase eats a little more of the plant, until you are down to the very soil from which it broke through, and your vineyard is just gnarly stems; your fig trees are split, bark gnawed through; and all your poor herds are wool and bones, and you can't even bring an offering to the temple because there's nothing to offer.

Where is God? If you are standing out on a stubbly field that once held the green promise to sustain you for the coming year, and you are wondering what's next for your people, because that crop was your Plan A and B and C all rolled together, then it is reasonable that you wonder where God is, as Joel puts it, wondering “as your joy withers.”

That devastation feels a lot like punishment to the people, which is why it is sorta hard to preach from the prophets. What we now attribute to science and nature, natural disasters and fortunes, for that matter, Joel's people linked directly to their covenantal relationship with God—for good or bad. Joel lays out a plague scenario that morphed into drought, hunger, groaning earth, and even dizzy sheep. No guess as to how the people think God feels.

B.

I don't know if we'll ever “get” what Joel's people endured.

Others might understand. Madagascar has been in

Locust plague state since 2012, threatening 13 million lives, and while it's still in trouble, it is recovering through modern efforts. Australia and Africa regularly see devastating outbreaks. Just a couple weeks ago a student, Brandon Woo, rediscovered a specimen from the extinct Rocky Mountain Locust plague that ravaged the plains and Midwest before the turn of the 20th century. So, maybe we aren't that far removed, if you think about it.

Maybe the plagues that would stop us here in Milford are technological in nature, instead of natural in nature. There would be boo-woeing, if a cyber bug swarmed and gobbled up our access to Netflix or Amazon...oh wait, that just happened. I hope it doesn't happen again.

Maybe the plague cutting, hopping, destroying and swarming our whole nation now is of the political persuasion. Or maybe the world's plague is war, or maybe it's poverty...

Last week, the lead story in the Times began—“Rendel, Haiti—There is a plague on this town.”ⁱ Hurricane Matthew didn't just wipe out what they had, it churned up and spread Cholera—a microscopic plague that some are too ashamed to have treated. It can be dehumanizing to need so much, which might point to what Joel's people felt.

You might be creeped out by the locusts, but many of you know what it feels like to have something unwelcome arise that gobbles away the new growth in your life. Before you even have time to recover, that swarm catches you off guard and chomps away at more of you. Then when you didn't think there was anything left to take, others hop in, sapping your spiritual marrow by this time because the flesh is gone. But you are not done yet. That's right, another round of locusts! The bottom has been lowered and lowered. And at this point you pray that you have fed those locust enough that they grow migrating wings, so that they will...get...out...of...here!

This prophet hitches up his overhauls, lays down his insect net, and calls the people together.

C.

“Grieve!” He tells them. “Wail and tear your clothes and own the loss.” That is definitely a strong practice of OLD Testament religion. Recognize before God the loss. God hears!

Prophet Joel directs the people to gather to lament and remember. Grieve this communal loss and suffering as well as the personal. Assess and confess. Call on God. For one thing, this is healthy, for adults, for teenagers and for children. And this is a pivotal moment for the gathered faith community. Because now you don’t have detached desperate individuals clawing at hopeless returns. Instead your gathered folks gain perspective on their way forward— together with God and with each other. Either we sit down and fade away in this old field, or we find some seeds and get to work. They will need each other.

This is what church is good at! For the sake of worshipping God, we have this place and thousands of years of traditions to frame our experiences: liturgical tradition that invites us to offer our hurts and sins as much as talents and treasures; words when we have none; traditions to sing our stories – the good parts and the bad parts (good part--“God saved”—bad part—a wretch—or as my sister used to sing, “a wrench like me”); we have this prophetic tradition that honors the stories of God’s people. And we are God’s people. Joel wants us to know that God is making this possible; that God wants **resilience** for us...

“Because God is gracious and merciful,” says Joel, “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” Divine Temperament! This is the God who hears and restores. God lays out the restoration plan—here comes the rain, time to clean the threshing floor, and prep the vats for oil and

wine. Go ahead and get your knife and fork. There will be plenty.

That’s **divine promise** to restore fields, vineyards and fruit trees. Oh, boy, it’s not magic Chia-Style growth that materializes in 7 days. This is restoration that God draws the community into, empowering them where once they felt hopeless. They turn, and God is here! “You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,” God proclaims.

D.

Then Afterwards,—I love this. “Afterwards” draws our focus beyond the empty fields, beyond the restoration that has begun...toward the **future**. Past---important; Present---in-breaking of God’s blessing--important. But here comes God’s good news; it’s a blessing to have the assurance to envision what’s down the road! The long view. The new day ahead.

“Afterwards, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, and you all will prophesy and you all will dream dreams and you all will see visions. Everyone, doesn’t matter if you are in 4th grade now, or were in 2009, or in 1994 or in 1962 or in 1936; Everyone, regardless of what you do and what you have done; despite what you have or what you don’t have.

So that!!!! you won’t have to wonder about where God is, God will pour out God’s spirit on **you**, which means you are part of the in-breaking good news for the world; you are sowing hope in the fields of despair. And those dreams and those visions are a faith investment in the future.

Let me tell you, while you might think that prophecies are an Old Testament thing, or that we modern Christians can’t handle them unless they are tucked away in Dr. Seuss masterpieces like *The Lorax*, or Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan’s lyrics of *The Times they are a changing*...let me tell you, those prophecies and God’s restorative power are at work

in the world because that Spirit has been poured out on us.

I've seen that power among **you**—from the classroom, to the parking lot, to the 3rd floor, to the main office, to the back Plymouth lawn, and here in this holy place.

I've seen that power—in our Food 2 Kids ministry, when volunteers return week after week to sort, pack and deliver for the sake of neighbors they even don't know, but for a need God equips them to meet. There's no doubt where God is, when children and youth come to help, and they--like their parents or grandparents who brought them--are empowered to serve. It's not an immediate, magic mission we're after; it takes tending and consistent care to transform food insecurity among Milford's kids. Because God is here and merciful, our church is working with the entire community of Milford to now serve children in our public elementary schools and middle schools.

I've seen God's power—two weeks ago, the Jay Brother's Unified Resource Center in Bridgeport celebrated its grand opening. Before he passed, Jay, member and beloved youth group advisor, shared

ⁱ Read more at www.nytimes.com/2016/10/15/world/americas/cholera-haiti-hurricane-matthew.html? r=0

his vision with addiction counselor colleagues for a program to **reintegrate** folks into the community after all kinds of setbacks—addiction, incarceration, mental health struggles. John and Jessica Hamilton planted that vision on Jay's behalf, and by the grace of God and hard work of relationship building and resource management, hope and excitement, they are serving those who need second chances. You should have heard Senator Murphy reflect on those great individuals who not only do good while they are here, but are able to impact many, many, many people, 10, 50, 100 years from now!ⁱⁱ

I know you've seen God at work.

When God's people gather, we amass a pool of wisdom and resources and strength that no single person possesses on her own. Which inspires me and gets me to wondering—What does God have in store for us here?

“O Children of Zion,” says Joel, “be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God,” for God says, “I'm here!” Amen.

ⁱⁱ Senator Chris Murphy spoke at the Opening Ceremony in Bridgeport before the ribbon was cut. Read more on the Facebook page: Well Wishes for Jay Brothers.