

Joel 2:23-32 “The Rains Have Returned”

Back when I was doing my series on heroic prophets of the Old Testament, I didn't get around to preaching from the Book of Joel. And of course Joel Thomas reminded me that the Prophet Joel had heroic characteristics too! The problem was, I was running out of time and had to wrap that series up. So I made a promise that the next time the Book of Joel came up in the lectionary, I'd be sure to preach on him. So the Book of Joel came up this week, and in a big way too! I would rate Joel up there among the “heroic prophets” because he was one who offered hope to God's people who were under siege by the Babylonians and who were in deep despair because they never thought they'd be able to go back to their homeland.

Joel starts out by describing a plague of locusts that devastated the land and destroyed the agricultural resources, and then he goes on to compare the Babylonian army to a plague of locusts that came into the land and wiped out the human resources. So the question is, “Is this a response to an ecological disaster, or is this a response to an invading army?” And the answer, according to our scripture, is “yes to both.” Either way, Joel's overall theme is, “Even after destruction, there is restoration.” Or to put it another way, “Even after disaster, there is hope.” In the end, God will restore all things, and there will be a time of great abundance. Sort of like when the rains come after a long drought. But the biggest blessing when those rains come is that God will pour out God's Spirit onto the land. And on the day that the Spirit is poured out 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 sounds familiar! Where have we heard this before? Right! Pentecost! This passage from Joel that we're reading here this morning is the same passage that Peter used when he preached to Jesus' followers in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost!

Friends, welcome to “Pentecost in the Park” part 2. It would have been a lovely day to be in the park, but it gets too windy in that part of town this time of year. So on what Joel calls, “The Day of the Lord,” which we talked a little bit about Thursday night in Bible study, some great things are going to happen. There will be some powerful healing of both land and people. This healing Spirit will be universal in nature. It will be for sons and daughters, young and old, slave and free. But it’s not just for the people. If we go back to verse 21-22, Joel writes,

“²¹Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things! ²²Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield.”

So this isn’t just good news for Israel, this is good news for *all* creation. But for Joel’s audience, this Day of the Lord was something to come. It was something that was yet to be realized. If we were to read on into verse 30 and 31, Joel writes that before the day of the Lord comes,

“I will show signs in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood.”

And of course, in Joel’s day all that blood, fire, and smoke came in the form of the Babylonian army as they swooped in like locusts, laid waste to the land, and carried off Israel’s people into exile.

We’ve seen our fair share of fire and smoke in the last year. We are only 12 days away from being at the one year anniversary of the massively destructive Camp Fire that laid waste to thousands of acres of land, five communities, and 85 lives lost. And even though that fire never reached Chico, we have all been living with the consequences of that fire to various degrees. Several of our families who lost homes in the burn zone have moved on to other communities outside Chico, but mostly outside of California altogether. Our resources, both human and

material, have been impacted. And the thing is, we don't like to admit this. So many people say, "Who am I to complain? It could have been much worse. At least I didn't lose my home." But then someone who lost their home will say, "Who am I to complain? It could have been much worse! At least my family is alive!" Then someone who lost a family member will say, "It could have been much worse. We could have all died." And the can just keeps getting kicked down the line. The reality is, we have all felt the impact of this fire and have all been traumatized at some level. Chaplain Mary and other folk in the spiritual and mental health community calls it, "Vicarious trauma."

I wasn't kidding when I said, "Welcome to Pentecost in the Park Part 2." One of the things we do at Pentecost in the Park is kind of check in with each other as far as how we are all doing. The Prophet Joel promised God's people that hope was coming. We here at First Christian Church have recognized the vicarious trauma that we've felt over the past year, and a couple of weeks ago, we decided to start Advent Season two months early and start talking about hope.

My question for you this morning is, "Where do you feel hopeful?" With some of the hits we've all taken in the past year, we could easily slip into despair and let hope slip away. Having faith that the Holy Spirit will pour out on us, and that each of us ... men and women, young and old ... will have visions and dream dreams, I'd like to know what you are hopeful for. And for those of us who have been touched by that Spirit and have already had visions and dreams, tell us about them! What did you see in these visions and dreams?

[Testimony time].

"O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before."

In the months after the fire, I noticed that when the grass started growing again in the burn zone it seemed to be coming in greener than it had before. I noticed that the wild flowers this spring were particularly bright and healthy looking. I've also noticed a great deal of strength and resilience in the people who lived in the burn zone. I've been meeting with a planning group in Paradise that's coordinating a number of events commemorating the one year anniversary of the fire. There's going to be some really amazing remembrance services all up and down the ridge and even down here in Chico. Our church has been part of a plan to observe 85 seconds of silence on November 8 at 11:08 to remember the 85 people who died in the fire. The Chico Area Interfaith Council is holding an observance at the downtown plaza starting at 10:45 a.m. on November 8. We would love to see you there.