

Joel's Vision
Joel 2:12-13, 15-16, 28-29
Luke 18:9-14

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Joel 2:12-13, 15-16, 28-29

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. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.

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.

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

This Sunday is the second Sunday of Advent. You may have noticed the decorations, or the Advent Wreath.. Advent is the four weeks each year when we are preparing for Christmas.

At the risk of sounding like I am merely repeating the obvious, Christmas is a big deal. Bigger even than the sales at the mall. The second person of the Trinity, the one through whom all things were created,¹ ...in other words, *God*, ... came down here.

He did not come as a warrior king at the head of an army of angels, though he certainly could have. He did not come as the next Roman Emperor, wealthy and

¹ John 1.

powerful ruler of the Empire, though he certainly could have. He did not even come as some kind of movie hero magic man, though he certainly could have. He did not come to conquer the world at all, in the way that the people of the time understood.

No, when God came and walked the earth, he came as a baby. And not a baby born in the halls of power. A poor baby of a conquered people, who, before he could read, was a refugee in the Middle East.² When God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth and of all things, seen and unseen, came to Earth, he came in a way in which he was incredibly vulnerable.

To make any sense of that, we need to look earlier in the story. We need to look at what God had to say to God's people through the prophets.

Joel is speaking to a people who are deeply divided and who are increasingly secular.³ The people are paying more and more attention to the world around them and to the gods that their neighbors worship, and less and less attention to God. They are starting to assimilate into the culture around them, to the point where some people could ask the question whether there was still a distinct Jewish culture. Different groups of people disagree about what proper devotion to God is, and want to define it for everyone else in mutually-contradictory ways. If that sounds like a world and a people with which we may be familiar, then good, you're paying attention.

Before the passage that we read this morning, Joel preaches invading armies and destruction. Joel talks about locusts of all types – the cutting locusts, the swarming

² The Flight to Egypt took place before Jesus was two years old.

³ There is disagreement as to when Joel wrote.

locusts, the hopping locusts, and the destroying locusts. “For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.”⁴

Joel knows that you don’t get people’s attention by telling them that everything is pretty much okay, and things are not pretty much okay. Joel sees God’s people not living like, well, God’s people. They are living just like all the people around them. They are not practicing justice. They are trying to worship God on the Sabbath and oppress the poor on Monday. They are not caring for the widow and the orphan, the vulnerable among them and around them.

This was not okay.

Again, if this sounds like a world and a people with which we may be familiar, then good, you’re paying attention.

It is not okay.

Joel preaches that God wants the people to come back to God, and to be God’s people once again. God says, “Return to me with all your heart...return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”⁵

But what God does not want is self-righteous public activity. God does not need or want a Political Action Committee or a media spokesperson.⁶ God does not need or

⁴ Joel 1:15

⁵ Joel 1:13

⁶ I am reminded of the question, “What does God need with a starship?” – Captain James T. Kirk, *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989).

want a culture war over Nativity Scenes or symbols on coffee cups or exactly what words people say to wish someone happiness at this time of year. God does not even need or want us to make a huge public big deal over changing our behavior.

These are distractions from what God does want, and often counterproductive.

These are ways of saying, "Look how holy I am, and how much of a good person I am."

These are ways of exalting ourselves rather than God. These are ways of being a Pharisee.

They may be far easier for us to achieve than what God wants, but that does not make them okay.

What God wants, and what God was willing to leave Heaven and come down here and die to get us to do, is much simpler than that. Simpler, but not easier.

What God wants is for us to return to God with all of our hearts. God wants us to be truly sorry for the things that we have done wrong, and then to get about truly being God's people. Loving God, loving all of the people whom God created.

God wants us to rend our hearts and not our garments. This is an inward thing, not something that you do on the outside, and it is certainly not something that you can make someone else do by force or by shaming them. Maybe that's why Jesus came as a baby -- military force was the wrong tool to make this happen.

God does want us to keep Christ in Christmas. But that's not something we do by political action or by making a stink in the media.

God wants us to keep Christ in Christmas by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked,⁷ forgiving the guilty,⁸ welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick,⁹ and loving our enemies.¹⁰

Feeding the hungry. In the richest country in the world, it is shameful that people go to bed hungry.

Clothing the naked. Donating coats to the coat drive and gloves and hats to the Tree of Warmth. Helping to make sure that everyone has the winter clothing that they need.

Forgiving the guilty. This is one area where we have a real opportunity to stand out from the people around us, because the culture around us is not often interested in forgiving others. Christ died for our sins, and Christ died for the sins of people whom we don't like, too. Even those people who sin against us, or, as we say here every week in the Lord's Prayer, our debtors.

Welcoming the stranger. All are welcome here at Westminster on Sunday morning, but how are we doing on welcoming strangers to our neighborhoods?

Caring for the sick. Caring for the sick people whom we know, but also caring for sick people whom we don't know. On this AIDS Awareness Sunday, that includes people with scary diseases. This includes people who have mental illnesses, as well as people with easier-to-understand physical illnesses.

⁷ Matthew 25:31-46

⁸ Matthew 5:21-26, Matthew 6:12

⁹ Matthew 25:31-46

¹⁰ Matthew 5:43-48

Loving our enemies. Yes, loving our enemies. Even people who do not love us back. Even people who hate us. Whether “us” is a Christian “us” or an American “us” or a racial “us” or an economic “us” or, as it usually is, a mixture of those things. This is connected to forgiving the guilty, and it’s not easy.

If we return to God, Joel tells us, it is then that God will pour out God’s Holy Spirit upon all people. “...your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old people shall dream dreams, and your young people shall see visions. Even on the ... slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.”¹¹

If we do these things in our hearts and in the world, then we will change the world, one coat at a time, one person forgiven and welcomed at a time.

If we do these things in our hearts and in the world, sooner or later, the world around us will see what we are doing. People will see that we are not living by the world’s rules of greed and cruelty.

If we do these things in our hearts and in the world, then God will pour out God’s Holy Spirit on us, because we will truly be God’s people, the people we were born and called to be.

Let it be so.

AMEN.

¹¹ Joel 2:28-29.