

Joel's Hope
Joel 2:12-13, 28-29
Luke 11:9-13

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Joel 2:12-13, 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.

Then afterwards 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 11:9-13

'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Joel is writing in a time of disaster. The Hebrew people have returned from exile. They are back in their own land, but they have already returned to worshipping the idols of the surrounding countries, and following their practices, instead of God's law. Practices like child sacrifice to Ba'al. Practices like brutally exploiting the poor for the benefit of the rich.

A plague of locusts has come, and they are eating all the crops in the fields. This is a threat to the very existence of the Hebrew people. With no food, everyone will die, rich and poor alike. And everybody knows it.

"Yet even now," God calls the people to return to God. Put away those idols. Go back to taking care of all the people, not just the rich and the well-connected.

Return to the LORD their God. "Rend your hearts and not your clothing."
Don't just return to God in external behavior and in appearance. Things done for the sake of appearance don't count.

"Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful." Even when the world seems grim and the outlook bleak, God loves God's people. God wants what is best for them. Always.

We know something about disasters, don't we? More American deaths were reported from COVID-19 just on Wednesday than happened on 9/11.¹ Over a quarter-million Americans have died so far, and it's not over yet. If you don't know anyone who has at least been sick, just wait. Hospital administrators are worried not just about running out of equipment, but about running out of skilled practitioners to take care of all the patients.

There is a light at the end of this tunnel. Vaccines have been developed. We will likely start to see them deployed soon. But it's going to take a while, and we have to live with the situation until then.

¹ 2,977 on 9/11
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_September_11_attacks), 3,157 American deaths on December 2, 2020 (<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/coronavirus-updates-daily-deaths-surpass-3-000-obama-clinton-bush-say-they-d-get-vaccine-on-camera-cdc-predicts-450k-deaths-by-february/ar-BB1bALNs?ocid=msedgntp>).

“Yet even now,” God calls the people to return to God. Even now God calls us to keep the faith. Resist the calls to fear that are everywhere in the media. God has not abandoned us. God will never abandon God’s people.

Return to the LORD our God. “Rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Don’t just return to God in external behavior and in appearance. Wearing a cross around your neck or being in worship on Sunday morning is not the sole determiner of being a good Christian. As the old joke goes, attending church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than being in the parking lot makes you a car.

Return to the LORD our God.

Love God.

Trust God. God never promised that we would not go through difficult times. If someone promised you that you’d never experience difficult times, I’m sorry, but that wasn’t God.

God promised to walk with us through difficult times. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”² “And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”³

My beloved siblings, look around you. This is what a national version of the valley of the shadow of death looks like. And truly I tell you, you are not alone.

² Psalm 23:4, KJV.

³ Matthew 28:20

We are not alone.

God is walking with us.

Love God, and love our neighbors. Wear our masks. Practice social distancing. Avoid crowds. Try not to be that person who gets sick, and then gets everyone sick. Check on our neighbors. Take care of each other.

“Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful.” Even when the world seems grim and the outlook bleak, God loves God’s people. God wants what is best for us. Always.

God says, “I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your old [people] will dream, your young [people] will see visions. I’ll even pour out my Spirit on the servants, men and women both.”⁴

With the Holy Spirit, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

⁴ Joel 2:28-29, *The Message*, adapted.

So, as you go about your lives this next week, remember that God walks with you, even unto the end of the world. No matter how alone you may feel, God is there, and God loves you.

Fear no evil, but look for ways to love and take care of your neighbors. Not out of fear, but out of the kind of love with which God loves you.

Amen.