

Tell the Children

Reading from the beginning of the Book of Joel: *Elders, listen to this message. Listen to me, all you who live in the land. Nothing like this has ever happened during your lifetime or during your ancestors' lifetimes. Tell your children about these things, let your children tell their children, and let your grandchildren tell their children.*¹

Throughout the week, as I'm preparing a sermon, I keep adding to a document titled Sermon Notes. Initially, I type the words Sermon Title at the top of the page. Then, as I read and research and contemplate the scripture, I list possible titles. Usually, I end up with two or three. This week the number was eight. God Will Provide. Confronted with Crisis. Rend Your Hearts. Where Are the Locusts? Fighting the Locusts. On That Day. What to Tell the Children. Tell the Children.

This progression reflects my thought process this week. In the end, I decided telling the story is what Joel – and the entire Bible, as well as the church throughout the ages – is all about.

One commentator puts it this way: *The Book of Joel begins by referring to a story that is worthy of being told and retold. The community has experienced a crisis of such a magnitude that nothing like it has ever happened in the memory of the oldest of the present generation nor of their parents. In addition, the people have experienced a deliverance so memorable that the prophet wants his hearers to tell their children, so the story can be passed from generation to generation.*²

*This word from Joel raises the question: What shall we tell our children? Considering that question on the basis of the whole Bible, the first answer will be: Tell them about the mighty acts of God, culminating in the story about what God did through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Book of Joel suggests that the children also be told about other things God has done in the history of our own people and our own family. We are encouraged to look for our own stories to tell: What events have occurred in our own histories which correspond to the deliverance from the locust plague in Joel?*³

Unlike the other three minor prophets in this sermon series, Joel doesn't identify himself with a particular king or time period. Some, like the creators of the chart I've been using, place Joel before the time of Amos, Habakkuk, and Haggai. Others, like the writers of the Bible project, place him after them.

In many ways, this doesn't matter, because the story itself is timeless and universal.⁴ It begins with a crisis. A plague of locusts has devastated the land and the people. It announces the defeat of evil. The Day of the Lord is the time when God will defeat all evil for good and save God's people. It calls for repentance. Joel urges people to give their hearts to God while there's time. If they turn to Him on the Lord's Day they will be spared. It promises God's presence. God will pour out His Spirit upon people in the last days. Peter states in his sermon in

¹ Joel 1:2-3, *New Century Version*

² James Limburg, *Interpretation: Hosea-Micah*, John Knox Press, 1988, p.55.

³ James Limburg, *Interpretation: Hosea-Micah*, John Knox Press, 1988, p.60.

⁴ Adapted from The Bible Project: Joel, <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/joel/>

Acts 2 that this was fulfilled centuries later on Pentecost after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension.⁵ It promises restoration for all of creation. God's people will be restored, but that's not all. The earth gets renewed too. God will heal creation into a new Eden.

This is Joel's story; this is the Bible's story; this is the church's story; this is our story; this is God's story.

Each time I read the second verse of this book, I shake my head and smile a bit. Joel writes: *Nothing like this has ever happened during your lifetime or during your ancestors' lifetimes.* I imagine these words have been uttered in every generation, and perhaps in every household, throughout history. Crisis occurs in every life, in every generation, in every culture, in every region of the world. Natural events along with human sin and failure wreak devastating destruction in our world. While it may not be helpful to try to rank the crisis level of every event, telling and hearing the stories helps to put each crisis into perspective. Sometimes it actually is a mountain. Other times, it's only a molehill.

In any case, God longs to show love to the devastated and mercy to those who own up to their sin and confess it. In response to crisis, we take our cues from Joel. We lament, we grieve, we cry out to God, we confess, we repent, we take action, we make changes. It's not healthy to get stuck in or consumed with any one of these activities. Each one is necessary in its time.

All of that leads us to hope that God will one day defeat evil in our world but also inside of us and bring God's holy presence to make all things new. God's mercy and love are more powerful than God's wrath and judgment. God's forgiveness and mercy open up a whole new creation. God cares about all of creation and all people.

As we end our time with Joel, Haggai, Habakkuk, and Amos, I want to share with you three items that have occupied my thoughts this week. In my mind, they are related to what we've heard from the biblical prophets. I hope you'll find them meaningful and thought provoking as well.

First are the words we heard last week from a modern day prophet, Steve Mascho, as told to us by his widow, Karen. At the end of his life, Steve wanted everyone to know that relationships are the most important things in our lives, especially our relationship with Jesus. He encouraged us to see the good in every person we meet and bring it out. He challenged us to listen to the voice of Jesus. As a church, Steve told us to remember that love is the essence of the Bible. We need to stay focused on loving God and our neighbors. We are to be hope for each other.

The second item I'll share is about the nature of hope. As a child, the most disturbing words from Joel were from about blood and fire and columns of smoke. About the sun turning to darkness and the moon turning to blood. Now the most disturbing verse is Joel 3:10. *Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning-hooks into spears; let the weakling say, "I am a warrior."*⁶ That's the opposite of what we read in Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3. This makes me think of how some read the prophetic and apocalyptic books with glee, chomping at the bit to take up arms and looking forward to a time when the ones they label as sinners will be destroyed. Maybe hope isn't always good.

I've been reading a novel about a small town in Quebec and a man who has spent many years investigating murders. As the detective was searching the home of a murder victim, he came across a portrait of a poet he knew painted by a famous artist who lived in his small town.

⁵ Acts 2:14-41

⁶ Joel 3:10, *New Revised Standard Version.*

The artist had painted the demented old poet as the aging Virgin Mary. Forgotten. Embittered. A clawlike hand gripped a ragged blue shawl at her neck. Her face was filled with loathing. Rage. There was none of the tender young virgin about this grizzled old thing.

But. But. There. In her eyes. Was a glint, a gleam. With all the brushstrokes. All the detail. All the color, the painting, finally came down to one tiny dot. The poet as the Virgin Mary saw something in the distance. Barely visible. Hardly there. More a suggestion. In the bitter old woman's near-blind eyes, the artist had painted hope.

The detective knew that most people who looked at the painting saw the despair. It was hard not to miss. But what they did miss was the whole point of the painting. That one dot.⁷

The detective thought about an email he'd spent the evening translating. Like the painting, it was infused with bitterness. But there was also hope. Though a different kind from the one in the painting. This was a hope of revenge. Of retribution. It reeked of greed. And delusion. And profound optimism that something horrible would happen to someone else. And it had. Hope itself wasn't necessarily kind. Or a good thing.

The detective wondered what the murder victim saw when he stood in front of the painting and looked into the eyes of the Virgin. Did he see redemption or permission to be bitter? Maybe, in that face, he saw his own mother. Glaring down at him. In all her madness and delusion, disappointment and entitlement. Maybe he saw what happens when false hope is spread over generations. Maybe that's why he liked it. Maybe he saw himself.⁸

I wonder what kind of hope I read in the Bible, what kind of hope I carry, what kind of hope I spread. I hope the hope I'm spreading is the hope that God will one day defeat evil in our world and also inside of us and bring God's holy presence to make all things new. That God's mercy and love are more powerful than God's wrath and judgment.

I'll end with an excerpt from an article in the current issue of *The Mennonite*. The theme of the issues is journeys with the church. One essay written by a young Mennonite Pastor, highlights the importance of continuing to tell the story in every generation. Here's part of the essay titled "Should I Stay or Go?"⁹

Even though I'm a professional Christian, faith doesn't always come naturally to me. Steeped in a post-Enlightenment world that worships empiricism, logic and the scientific method, I'll sometimes find myself saying something about the nature or goodness of God—or even God's existence—when a part of my brain pipes up, "You couldn't possibly really believe that." And another part responds, "Yes I do."

I know I'm not alone. In a disenchanted world, where the material world is no longer enchanted with angels or fairies or demons or gods that make it function, and we're often disillusioned with organized expressions of religion, what should people of faith do? What should I do? Should I stay—with all the mental gymnastics and unresolved questions and frequent suspension of belief that entails? Or should I go—with all the pain of changed relationships and uncertainty about ultimate reality and risk of ethical unmooring that entails? When faith is only one option among many, perhaps even the hardest option among many, why do we stay?

In large part, I stay because of the church. I recognize that as someone who earns my living from the church, I have, at best, mixed motives in saying this. At the same time, I know

⁷ Louise Penny, *Kingdom of the Blind*, Minotaur Books, 2018, pp. 206-207.

⁸ Penny, p. 240.

⁹ Jon Carlson, "Should I Stay or Go?" *The Mennonite*, November 2019, Vol. 22, No. 11, pp. 20-22, www.themennonite.org

that I have found in the church—and specifically the Mennonite church—a community that makes faith not only possible but desirable.

The church makes faith plausible for me, much as Alcoholics Anonymous makes sobriety plausible. By being around other people who exemplify the best of what human life can be, drawing from rich traditions of spiritual practices, my faith is sustained. Or, to borrow from biblical language, together as a church we are “rooted and established in love.” The church sustains my faith.

I imagine some will find this essay disturbing. I find it challenging...and comforting. It motivates me to keep telling the story – Joel’s story, the Bible’s story, the church’s story, our story my story, God’s story. To remind myself and others of the kind of hope I believe God wants us to have, even if that hope is only as big as a dot in a grizzled old woman’s eye. Hope that God’s mercy and love are more powerful than God’s wrath and judgment. Hope that God’s forgiveness and mercy open up a whole new creation. Hope that God cares about all of creation and all people.

Thanks be to God!