



Advent Peace
LISTENING TO JOEL

Williamsburg Christian Church

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INTRODUCTION

Joel seems to be written in a quiet time of Judah's history.¹ It was the post-exile period. It appears they are governed by priests and elders rather than kings and princes. In 515BC the Second Temple is built. You may remember from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) that the Temple is life for them because it is God's dwelling place. The Temple serves as a sign of God's presence among his people. Sadly, Judah appears to have taken the Temple and all that it offers for granted.

Around this time Judah experienced a devastating locust plague which stripped the land bare of every crop of vegetation (Joel 1:4-10). Just when the land was beginning to flourish again, a drought came and all that had grown withered away (Joel 1:11-12, 16-20). Economically, Judah was in poor shape. Nationally, the once prideful nation was in a state of confusion and anxiety. Morally and spiritually, Judah was in terrible condition. Enter the poet-prophet Joel comes to deliver his message.

Joel's poetic word from God centers around two messages—the Day of the Lord, which is a day that speak of judgement (not end-times) and repentance that leads to restoration. Joel begins his message recounting the plague and drought telling them that these catastrophes serve as a prequel of the drama that will unfold. Not only will the "Day of the Lord" involve Judah, it will include all of humanity as they know it. Joel calls them to immediate repentance, to gather as a people crying out to God dressed in clothes of mourning and fasting in deep humility over the condition of their lives, their country and the surrounding nations. Joel calls the priests to lead God's people in this worship gathering.

JOEL

Joel name "Yahweh is God." Like his name, his prophetic vision is about God and from God. God's judgement is fast approaching and Judah stands at the threshold of life and death because of their sins against the Lord. Joel tells them that the locust plague and drought is more than misfortune. It is a sign of their separation from God because no grain, wine, and oil leaves them with no way to carry out their daily acts of worship in the Temple (Joel 1:9-10; 2:14, 19, 24; see also Leviticus 2:1-16; 6:14-18; 10:12-13). The cannot offer worship to him.

Of course, it didn't have to be this way. Judah refused to listen to the Scriptures or the poet-prophets of old. Due to what seems to have been their ongoing zealous pride of nation (a sin God's "chosen people" often fall in to) and their worship of other gods (reading the entirety of Joel, apostasy seems to be their greatest sin), the Lord needs

¹ It is important to note that scholars aren't certain when Joel prophesied or when the literary work that bears his name was written. Scholars have proposed every era of Israel's history after the division of the kingdom into Israel and Judah. Some think he was a contemporary of Elijah or Elisha, or Amos, or Jeremiah, or Zechariah, or even after Malachi. The Temple stands, most likely the second one, but no kings are mentioned. Some enemies are identified, but none of them are the superpowers Assyria, Babylon, or Persia. We just don't have many clues to arrive at a definitive timeline or historical context.

them to see that their communion with him is no more. Through Joel the Lord is trying to get his stubborn, prideful, nationalistic people's attention. He had to take drastic measures because they ignored all other attempts. As usual, the Lord sends them a poet-prophet to interpret for Judah the why behind what they have experienced. The hope of the Joel is that what has happened will drive Judah to repentance which will lead to their restoration.

God often works this way in the life of Israel. He whispers. He directs his people to his promises found in Scripture. He entrusts them to priests and elders. When these priests and elders fail to hear God or heed the promises and commands of Scripture, he will send to them a poet-prophet. The Lord goes through all of this effort because he does not take delight in the suffering of humanity (see Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11). The Lord loves all that he has created and longs to for His people to know His presence. He wants them to know his goodness and faithfulness, but when they turn from him and place their affections in something else, which for Judah was usually their own self-sufficiency and nationalistic pride, they abandon the Lord. He loves them so much that He refuses to force Himself upon them, so he will give them what they want—a life without him. This means no blessing. This means no divine favor. This means no divine presence. But, the Lord refuses to abandon them.

The Lord loves them with a relentless passion. You can hear it in the poet-prophet's voice. It is the Lord's depth of love that compels him to send another poet-prophet. The poet-prophet will interpret what the Lord is doing and give a voice to what God's people have been doing that has caused them to stubbornly refuse to see. The Spirit of God will give the poet-prophet the eyes to see the sinfulness and the voice to name it. He will see the injustice and call it out for what it is. He will see the idolatry of misplaced affections, the things that are held in too high esteem, and call them what they are: idols.

THE LIFE OF THE POET-PROPHET

The poet-prophet is not merely a pair of eyes or a voice, but a person. He has his own personality and experiences as one with the people in need of repentance. He too is a Jew, a citizen of the nation. He speaks as one of them, but as one called by God as a truth-teller. To quote Abraham Heschel, one of history's greatest and most respected Jewish theologian and scholar on the Hebrew prophets, “[The prophet] is also a preacher, poet, patriot, statesman, social critic, and moralist.”² Unfortunately for the prophet, this is not how he is categorized by his fellow country men and women at the time. His preaching is labeled too intense, negative or judgmental. His critique of his country's way of life or nationalism places him in the category of anti-patriotic. His social critic is labelled too conservative to some and too progressive to others. He is dismissed as too radical or at worst self-righteous in his moralism. Consequently, it rarely ends well for prophets. They most often end up martyred (Isaiah was sawn in two) or at the very least live a life of conflict. But the prophet's calling is sure and his courage runs deep.

² *The Prophets*, xxii.

Despite the countless days and nights they question God and wonder if their message matters or doubts the impact of God's prophetic word, they press on.

OUR FOCUS TEXT

At this point almost two chapters of judgment has taken place. They are heavy words filled with darkness and expressive images. Read Joel chapters 1-2:11.

Now we come to our focus text where judgement turns toward the possibility of restoration.

Joel 2:12-17

Yet even now—this is the Lord's declaration—turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning.

13 Tear your hearts, not just your clothes, and return to the Lord your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, and He relents from sending disaster.

14 Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him, so you can offer grain and wine to the Lord your God.

15 Blow the horn in Zion! Announce a sacred fast; proclaim an assembly.

16 Gather the people; sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even those nursing at the breast. Let the groom leave his bedroom, and the bride her honeymoon chamber.

17 Let the priests, the Lord's ministers, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say: "Have pity on Your people, Lord, and do not make Your inheritance a disgrace, an object of scorn among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

SOME DETAILED OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING THE TEXT

God speaks in verses 12-13, the prophet takes up the speech in verse 13 and offers a prayer for the priest to pray in verse 17.

Verse 12: The verse begins with the most important word of the prophetic vision: *waw* in the Hebrew.—“but” or “yet” in the English—to form a strong contrast, a reversal, to all that which has been said before. Keep this in mind as we will come back to this very important phrase.

In verses. 12-14, the word “hearts” occurs twice, emphasizing the inward and sincere repentance the Lord calls for.

“Return” (or turn) is found in all verses 12-14. Both the Lord and the poet-prophet issue the command to “return” or “turn.” It may be that the Lord will then “return” to his people, making his presence known to them once again.

The important word “for” occurs in verse 13, giving the reason why the return to the Lord is possible. It is because “He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in faithful [covenant] love,” and is willing to take back his planned judgement on his people. Such a description of God’s character is found in many the words of many other prophets and extends back to when God revealed himself personally to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7. The words, He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in faithful [covenant] love, would ring profoundly familiar to the people of Judah.

“Yahweh is your God” is repeated (verses 13-14), emphasizing the one who alone is Judah’s God and no doubt places Joel in an awkward position since that is also the meaning of his name.

The tearing off of one’s clothes, “fasting, weeping and mourning” (verses 12-13) are all characteristic of communal fasts of lament and deep emotion, such as that called for in verses 15-17. Such worship gatherings were held whenever God’s people was in some sort of trouble from war, famine or catastrophe. Back then the worship of God wasn’t about “me” or “my” or “personal Lord and Savior” language. To be a worshipper of God was to be a part of God’s community. Therefore the people of God were always called to gather together and during these times of confusion, catastrophe, anxiety, fear or impending judgement, come together with one voice in communal repentance. These gatherings called for expressions of sorrow rather than upbeat “God loves me” songs. They included falling on your face before God (prostrations on the ground), beating of breasts, putting of ashes upon the head (which is where Ash Wednesday during Easter comes from, by the way). The normal activities of life ceased as the people of God were called to wake up from the chaos of confusion, the subtly of their idolatry and its catastrophic consequence. They were called by the poet-prophet to plea with God for an Advent—for him to come, make his presence known again, forgive them in his faithful love and bring them peace.

Back to verse 12. Joel begins this portion of his message with the all important words, yet even now. It is a language of reversal, offering an alternative way. It is a language of hope, offering a different future than the one prophesied. It is a language of peace, offering a different state of mind, heart and soul for the present.

“YET EVEN NOW”

It is as if Joel is saying to God’s people, “Yet even now, despite your misplaced affections in other idols and desperate attempts to renew your economy by means other than trusting the Lord for your provision, if you wake up and turn back to him He will heal your land. Yet even now, while you are neck deep in the idolatry of your pride of nation, your God loves you and wants to offer you peace and well-being, if you wake up and turn back to Him. Yet even now, in your sinful disobedience and disregard of the Lord’s efforts to get your attention before now, if you wake up and turn back to Him He will come to you and make His presence known once again.” The poet-prophet is crying out to God’s people, with the hope-filled, peace-offering language of “yet even now,” that even while they’re utterly incapable of undoing what they have done to themselves, the Lord will forgive them, redeem them, restore them, and make them new, because the

return of His presence is the availability of God's peace— the wholeness, well-being and human flourishing for all through the presence of God.

Joel 2:18-31

18 Then the Lord became jealous for His land and spared His people. 19 The Lord answered His people: Look, I am about to send you grain, new wine, and olive oil. You will be satiated with them, and I will no longer make you a disgrace among the nations.

20 I will drive the northerner far from you and banish him to a dry and desolate land, his front ranks into the Dead Sea, and his rear guard into the Mediterranean Sea. His stench will rise; yes, his rotten smell will rise, for he has done catastrophic things.

21 Don't be afraid, land; rejoice and be glad, for the Lord has done great things.

22 Don't be afraid, wild animals, for the wilderness pastures have turned green, the trees bear their fruit, and the fig tree and grapevine yield their riches.

23 Children of Zion, rejoice and be glad in the Lord your God, because He gives you the autumn rain for your vindication. He sends showers for you, both autumn and spring rain as before.

24 The threshing floors will be full of grain, and the vats will overflow with new wine and olive oil.

25 I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust ate, the young locust, the destroying locust, and the devouring locust—My great army that I sent against you.

26 You will have plenty to eat and be satisfied. You will praise the name of Yahweh your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. My people will never again be put to shame.

27 You will know that I am present in Israel and that I am Yahweh your God, and there is no other. My people will never again be put to shame.

All the poet-prophet is speaking to in these restorative words of verse 12's language of "yet even now"—the forgiveness of sin, redeeming what has been done, restoring what has been lost, the promise of divine provision, restoration—points to the one thing all people have longed for since the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden: peace. To the people of God "peace" isn't the absent of chaos or confusion. **Peace is wholeness, wellbeing and human flourishing in the midst of chaos and confusion because this peace is attached to the presence of God's Spirit coming into the lives of God's people:**

Joel 2:28-32

After this, I will pour out My Spirit on all humanity; then your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will have dreams, and your young men will see visions.

29 I will even pour out My Spirit on the male and female slaves in those days.

30 I will display wonders in the heavens and on the earth: blood, fire, and columns of smoke.

31 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the great and awe-inspiring Day of the Lord comes.

32 Then everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh will be saved, for there will be an escape for those on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, as the Lord promised, among the survivors the Lord calls.

All that is broken, all that is lost, all that is hurting, all the wrongs that have been done, all the idols that have been built, can be redeemed and restored by the presence of God and the peace that comes. Joel's prophetic language of "Yet even now" makes it possible with the God who is able to do the impossible!

As we celebrate "yet even now" let us not forget that Joel is telling us that peace can only come only after the presence of God is received, and the presence of God is received only after the people repent. Sin becomes a barrier between God and His people. We hear it not only in the Hebrew prophets but also in the words of Jesus and the apostles because what was true then is true now (for example, see 1 John 1:5-2:6; Matthew 6:14; John 14:23). Why? Two reasons.

One reason is that sin is ultimately about allegiance. It is ultimately thinking I know better than God—I know what will give me hope, peace, joy and love, so I take it into my own hands and pursue it (whatever "it" is) and in its place my trust. For two, repentance is ultimately about awakening (which is why "wake up!" is often repeated throughout the Scriptures—see Joel 1:5; Isaiah 51:9, 17; Romans 13:11; 2 Peter 2:13-14) and humility. It is about recognition because when we awaken nothing or no one more beautiful, more faithful, more holy, more loving, more powerful, more gracious than God Himself. And just like Joel's message, only after God's people humble themselves, acknowledge their idols and misplaced affections and hopes and allegiances and trust, can we turn fully and completely back to God. He doesn't split allegiances. When they do, the poet-prophet declares that peace—wholeness, well-being and human flourishing—will come.

Let this Advent be for you what it has been for Christians for almost 2000 years: a time to repent and turn away from misplaced affections and hopes. The coming of God in the Christ-child and his outstretched arms on the cross means that we can be assured that the way of peace has been opened to us. Receive it.

5. In Philippians 4:6-7 the apostle Paul commands what I have long believed to be the impossible, until I listened more closely. He says, “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses every thought, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” I soon discovered that if in a prayer of repentance I obey each phrase of this text I opened myself up to the Spirit’s peace. I invite you to do the same. Here is how I pray this text as one prayer:

“Don’t worry about anything” Heavenly Father, your Scripture has told me to not worry. Clearly by the anxieties I am feeling right now I am not doing as you’ve asked. To be honest Father, I am blowing it. So, please help me by...

“but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” Father you have said in everything through prayer and petition with thanksgiving let my requests be made known to you. So, I’ll begin with thanksgiving. Thank you for...I thank you (thank him for everything single thing that comes to mind, no matter how mundane)... Now I freely ask (petition) that you....

“And the peace of God, which surpasses every thought, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Father you have said that your peace which surpasses reason and understanding will guard my heart and mind in Christ Jesus. Father, through your Holy Spirit reveal the things in my life that are keeping me from receiving your peace. As you do, open my heart and my mind to trust you. I have realized that as I’ve talked with you today I have much for which I can be thankful. Above all, I have you, Lord. I am yours and you are mine. By your Spirit, may your peace guard my heart and mind from anxiety, fear, or sin, and may I keep my trust in you. Amen.

I am not suggesting you should pray this prayer verbatim as I list here, though feel free. I am only suggesting that praying this prayer on phrase at a time in your own words can, by the power of God’s Holy Spirit living within, open you up to receiving the peace of Christ. Thanksgiving, petitions, repentance—all call us to tend to the presence of God in our lives. Doing that is always a good thing for us to do as his children!

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLE OF HOPE

As you light the candle of hope and peace this week consider asking the following questions, one each night. How is Jesus the peace of the world? How is Jesus the peace of our nation? How is the Jesus the peace of our neighborhood? How is Jesus the peace of our friends? How is Jesus the peace of our own lives?

CONCLUDING MEDITATION

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the Children of God.’ The followers of Jesus have been called to peace. When he called them they found their peace, for he is their peace. But now they are told that they must not only have peace but make it. And to that end they renounce all violence and tumult. In the cause of Christ nothing is to be gained by such methods. His kingdom is one of peace, and the mutual greeting of his flock is a greeting of peace. His disciples keep the peace by choosing to endure suffering themselves rather than inflict it on others. They maintain fellowship where others would break it off. They renounce all self-assertion, and quietly suffer in the face of hatred and wrong. In so doing they overcome evil with good, and establish the peace of God in the midst of a world of war and hate. But nowhere will that peace be more manifest than where they meet the wicked in peace and are ready to suffer at their hands. The peacemakers will carry the cross with their Lord, for it was on the cross that peace was made. Now that they are partners in Christ’s work of reconciliation, they are called the sons of God as he is the Son of God.” ~ **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

As we wait on the Lord in hope, we need the Holy Spirit to produce from within us peace (Galatians 5:22-23). Where we fix our eyes and focus the thoughts of our hearts matter. Pastor and author Henri Nouwen once said,

Keep your eyes on the Prince of Peace, the one who doesn’t cling to his divine power; the one who refuses to turn stones into bread, jump from great heights and rule with great power; the one who says, ‘Blessed are the poor, the gentle, those who mourn, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness’ (see Matt. 5:3–11); the one who touches the lame, the crippled, and the blind; the one who speaks words of forgiveness and encouragement; the one who dies alone, rejected and despised. Keep your eyes on him who becomes poor with the poor, weak with the weak, and who is rejected with the rejected. He is the source of all peace.”

1. During this holiday season what are some practical ways you can keep your eye on Christ who is your peace? For example, one that I will seek to do is go below the maximum speed limit while I drive (pray for me!), because hurriedness often disrupts my well-being (peace). What about you? What are something new things you can do or everyday things you can do differently?

PRAYER

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life. Amen.

(The Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi)