

Among the Survivors (We Give Thee But Thine Own)
Joel 2:23-32; Luke 18:9-14
Stewardship Dedication Sunday

Luke 18:9-14

⁹Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

¹¹The 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.

¹²I fast twice a week;

I give a tenth of all my income.’

¹³But 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!’

¹⁴I 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.”

Introduction to Scripture Reading

In the summer of 1873, inconceivably massive swarms of Rocky Mountain locusts formed what has been speculated by some to have been the greatest concentration of animals ever recorded.ⁱ

“They stripped clean fields and orchards. They ate laundry off lines and wool off the backs of living sheep. They ate leather and canvas and even the handles of wooden tools... It was, according to most witnesses, like experiencing the end of the world. The noise was deafening. One swarm [estimated to be 110 miles wide and 1800 miles long] took five days to pass.”ⁱⁱ

The next three summers, it only got worse: the swarms not only came back, but got bigger every year.

Bill Bryson has written, “There has never been a darker or more helpless moment in the whole of American history.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The book of Joel begins shortly after the whole countryside had been literally eaten away, by an inconceivably vast and calamitous swarm of locusts.

“Hear this, O elders,” says Joel. “Give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors?”

“Tell your children of it,
and let your children tell their children,
and their children another generation.”

For once, this wasn't a case of a prophet using allegorical language to describe a military devastation, but the other way around: Joel talks about the locusts as an invading army.

It has laid waste vines and splintered fig trees.

And in a world where religious life directly reflected agricultural life, Joel urges the people to lament also that “the grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD.”

Even the priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD.

“The fields are devastated, the ground mourns;
for the grain is destroyed,
the wine dries up, the oil fails” (Joel 1:2-10).

But after having interpreted that national catastrophe through the lens of God’s judgement on the people, and their failure to be faithful to God or to each other—particularly to the poor and powerless—Joel says:

“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 [just] your clothing.
 Return to the LORD, your God,
 who is gracious and merciful,
 slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
 and relents from punishing” (Joel 2:12-13).

So now, the healing prophecy of Joel brings the Word of God to the People of God:

Joel 2:23-32

²³O 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.

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

²⁵I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten,
 the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army,
 which I sent against you.

²⁶You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
 and praise the name of the LORD your God,
 who has dealt wondrously with you.

And my people shall never again be put to shame.

²⁷You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I, the LORD, am your God
and there is no other.

And my people shall never again be put to shame.

²⁸Then 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.

²⁹Even on the male and female slaves, in those days,
I will pour out my spirit.

³⁰I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke.

³¹The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood,
before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.

³²Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved;
for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said,
and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Prayer

Eternal Creator,

You are a God of inconceivable vastness,
a God of infinite mystery in the Holy Spirit
and profound intimacy in Jesus Christ.

Our lives seem so tiny on the ocean of your cosmos;
but you have given us life,
the awesome mystery of which soars into the heavens
and resounds with meaning throughout the universe.

You have brought us into being on a speck of cosmic dust orbiting a nondescript star, one among billions in a galaxy among billions.

And you have poured out your spirit on all flesh,
 so that all your children may prophesy,
 and no one is too old to dream or too young to see visions;
 no one has too little earthly power
 to receive your spirit.

And so we have to ask ourselves:

Are the threshing floors full? Or not?

Are the vats overflowing with wine and oil, or not?

And if they are,
 then we must hear you asking us why people are starving.

If the threshing floors and vats are full,
 we must hear you asking us
 why offerings are cut off from the house of the Lord;
 why your poor, hungry, terrorized and terrified children
are being put to shame
 at closed borders and before hardened hearts;
 why we are not dreaming dreams
 big enough to match your astonishing goodness,
 why our imaginations are so stunted
 as to fail to see visions of the world as you would have it;

because you have poured out your spirit on all flesh;
 but the prophetic voices of your bravest children
 still fall on deaf ears, inside and outside of your Church;
 and many of us who are perfectly equipped to prophesy
 can barely see beyond our own self-protecting fears

and self-regarding ambitions.

But the historical witness shows that prophets know.

The prophets seem to know something about what this world really is
as if they were reading the wealthy and powerful people's mail
while living one thin wall away from the poor and hungry people.

They know this human world: how it works, and what it is.

The prophets know.

And they know something about what this world isn't,
or at least, isn't yet.

They know that it is not yet what it was made to be,
and that human ingenuity alone cannot restore it,
partly because each of us has different ideas,
different myths we carry around with us,
about a supposedly halcyon time that came before us,
either just before our current circumstances,
or in some glorious, long-vanished golden age,
or all the way back to a time of original purity.

The prophets know that it's not about restoration to some mythically
untroubled time, but about living faithfully and justly as befits the
coming kingdom that even now you are bringing. The prophets know.

And they know what this world can be.

Help us, O God, to dream dreams and see visions
big enough, good enough, loving enough
to spark our imaginations
and do honor to the tradition in which we are being nurtured.

In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

The Sermon

Joel spoke to his own time, centuries after Israel's greatness, and centuries before Jesus was born.

And Joel speaks in 2019, with his promising message of threshing floors full of grain, and vats overflowing with wine and oil:

a message, in other words, of the kingdom of heaven made real on earth:

where there is plenty for everyone if we will share it and not hoard it;

where there is enough for everyone to be able to present a portion back to God to use for the great purposes of religious life, which include tending our spiritual lives while entering into true and just relationship with the people who have less power, fewer resources, and less of the life-sustaining things that we have in abundance.

We are being invited to bring forward a prayer to God to say:

This is what I offer back to you, O God, through my church, which is a gift from you, from my resources, which are also a gift from you.

This is one way that I want to participate in what you are doing in the world.

This is one way I want to say Thank you.

This one way I want to say that I believe there is a God who loves the world and loves you and loves me, a God of generosity and goodness and kindness and love who wants me to live into the truth and beauty that are part of embracing God's goodness and kindness and love and generosity.

What does it mean, to us as a people and to you as an individual, that we are called to be proclaimers of God's message of love and hope to the world?

Our Reformed ancestors, not to mention our kin all over the world, found in God's word a call to honor the humanity of everyone made in God's image—in other words, everyone.

We bow before the sovereignty of the God whose Word offers the promise that “*everyone* who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved,” regardless of race or background or culture or religious or political beliefs, or anything else;

and that no matter what cataclysms rock earth or heaven, “in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, there shall be those who escape, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.”

I think I just heard Joel say that those whom God calls will not be the only survivors, but they will be among them.

Which means that we live in a universe created by a God who will save whomever God chooses to save, and in Jesus Christ we have the living testimony that our Creator more than anything *wants* to save.

The self-righteous hypocrite and the confessing criminal both stand before God—the self-exalted will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted, but all stand in equal need before God, and all are called to be and do and give the best that they can, simply because that's what living in God's world means.

What does it mean to proclaim God's message of love and hope in the world?

In 1955, Abraham Joshua Heschel suggested what it does not mean when he wrote:

“It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats.

“Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid.

When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit;

when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past;

when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain;

when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—

its message becomes meaningless.”^{iv}

Our neighbor Erskine Clarke has a brand new book coming out about the history of Columbia Seminary, presumably with a long section on my glacial progress through the D.Min. program.

I’ve taken the liberty of adapting part of his epilogue, which is a breathtaking piece of work, to consider in more general terms what it means, to us as a people and to you and me personally as individuals, that we have been called to be proclaimers of God’s message of love and hope to the world.

“What is the character of the church as the body of Christ?...

And what is [any institution’s] calling, and what is [any institution’s] obedience, within the body of Christ, especially in a culture that is

fractured along so many lines and that is driven by such a profound individualism?

“The issues [we face] are issues..., in one way or another, rumbling through the whole of the nation’s life.

[Our distinct] character is shaped by [our] history and by [our institutions’] deepest faith commitments.

The history tells of other challenging times.

And the commitments encourage all [of us] to celebrate what earlier generations have said...that God is not finished with [us] and [our] service to the church.”^v

What does it mean to you that you have been called by God to proclaim God’s message of love and hope to the world?

Litany of Dedication (Psalm 115:1)

O God, speak to me now in silence as I open my heart and mind to you.

Hear my prayers for your church, and for all who are touched by its ministries...

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

Hear our prayers of gratitude for the people who came before us,
 who followed Jesus wherever he led them,
 who loved those they thought they could not love,
 who dedicated themselves to your work in the world
 when it was not easy to do so,
 because they trusted that one day we who came after them
 would benefit from their faithfulness.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

We seek your wisdom, your guidance, your direction,
as you lead us to be good stewards of the resources we have been given
and the mission you have entrusted to us.

Please help us think through, O God:
What would you have me do with what I have,
and what are you calling your church to do
that depends on what I can contribute,
whether financially or in any other way?

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

O God, we are all humbled before you.
Your love, your grace in Jesus Christ,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
call us into the world
to work for peace and justice and wholeness and faith,
to let your love be shown and known
and reflected in what we can do
because of the gifts you have given us.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

Amen.

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ⁱ This statement is often attributed to the world record keepers at Guinness by various online sources. I have not done adequate research to be able to vouch for either the attribution or the assertion itself.

ⁱⁱ Bill Bryson, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 252

ⁱⁱⁱ Bryson, *At Home*, 253

^{iv} Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 3

^v Adapted with gratitude from Erskine Clarke, *To Count Our Days* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 291-92