

Joel 2:23-32 Beyond Our Wildest Dreams
Luke 18:9-14
October 26, 2025

In the gospel reading from Luke we find Jesus telling about two people at prayer. One is a devout religious person, a pharisee; and the other a sinner, a tax collector. The first one prays, "I thank you God that I am not like others; robbers, evil-doers, and adulterers." The second, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

It is the second prayer, of course, that is affirmed. And then we are met with, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself . . . will be exalted."

You know by now that I have been given the opportunity to teach Old Testament in the Ohio Leadership Academy this fall. The OLA offers those sensing a call to ministry, access to educational resources that can inform their ministry, most often bi-vocational service in the churches.

The Old Testament is a varied collection of writings which span hundreds of years of history, many genres of literature, and an array of topics. One of the themes that runs through is the tension between justice and mercy, judgment and redemption, dare I say arrogance and humility. There is an idea that faithfulness to God results in a good and rewarding life, and conversely, that unfaithfulness leads to a hard and punishing life.

Of course, the people who under the guidance of the Holy Spirit gave us these writings were sophisticated enough to know that things do not always work out this way. They gave voice to their concerns and were not afraid to complain and address God with hard questions.

Given that the history of Israel was by and large a tragic one, they had many concerns. Though the story of the rise of the Israelite nation and kingdom has many highlights; the Exodus from Egypt, the establishment of a monarchy under King David, the time when he brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, the golden age of Israel is barely told before the tragedy sets in. The better part of the story, is of decline and fall, shame and embarrassment.

In much of the history, such as that reported in 1st and 2nd Samuel and 1st and 2nd Kings, the emphasis is on punishment for the failure of faith, or for the worship of other deities, or for the tolerance of grave injustice, often attributed to or blamed on the kings, although sometimes also on the people themselves, who are also responsible.

In the prophetic literature there was a back and forth between predictions of doom and promises of salvation, that sometimes create a kind of whiplash for the reader, who is trying to wrap the brain around the former, while being confronted with the latter.

In the end, it must be admitted that the faithlessness of Israel, its people and its kings, is not really the main

feature of the stories. Rather, it is the faithfulness of God, who remains true even when Israel is not. The conclusion ends up being that the whole idea of faithfulness leading to reward and faithlessness leading to punishment does not adequately characterize the situation.

It is too simple an explanation; not only does it miss the universal tendencies of human nature towards failures of faith and smack of work's righteousness, but it also fails to take into consideration God's character and intention.

One can see this message as a wrestling match (like last week); people, trying to explain the tragedy of their situation, learning to give way to grace. The end result is the discovery of a new kind of hope, a new understanding of the source of help.

One can see it in the text from the prophet Joel. Before, however, we engage the text, it is interesting to note how little is known about this person. There are differences of opinion about where to place him historically, some who place him around the time of Isaiah, and some in the Persian period three or four hundred years later.

In both cases is found the presence of the temple; at first it was Solomon's temple, and the later period it was the second temple. In both cases, so whether Joel is an early or later prophet, the religious and ritual life of the people, in terms of temple sacrifices, is attached to their overall well-being. Religion *can* be

understood as the making visible of what is invisible; concrete of what is abstract; not important for its own sake, but for the sake of that to which, *to whom*, it points. It is easy to miss the point.

Apparently, the real life event that inspired Joel was not military or political in nature, but environmental. It was a plague of locusts, which did more damage than an actual army, and caused severe economic stress. In any case, the situation is treated in very much the same way as it had been a military defeat; judgment for Israel's sins, a call to repentance, and the promise of a grand future.

In the first part of the reading is the promise of the vitality of the land, a return to plenty and future sustenance. It is in the latter part of the reading that there is something a little different; a nearly apocalyptic message including the assurance of salvation for all who call on the name of the Lord. It is a familiar passage because it is quoted in the New Testament; Peter included it in his Pentecost sermon in the Book of Acts. Paul quotes it in the 10th chapter of Romans.

“And afterward,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.

29 Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

30 I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
31 The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and dreadful day of
the Lord.
32 *And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved;*”

It is out of the specific troubles experienced by Israel and the early Jewish people that a comprehensive vision emerges for *the whole human race*. In the vision, the redemption of Israel fulfills the promise made to Abraham at the very beginning, that his descendants would become a great nation, and that by them, all the world would be blessed.

The word of punishment and judgment is countered by the word of healing and forgiveness and grace. The deeper the darkness, the brighter the divine light. For Christians, the understanding of God that culminates the message of the bible is the message of Christ Jesus, crucified and raised; it is the forgiveness of Sin, the Resurrection of the Dead, and the victory of divine love. Words heard often enough that they lose some of their sparkle from familiarity.

The implication is, of course, as we are continuously reminded, that we lead lives of gratitude, humility, and obedience, that we pray the latter prayer and make it our own; all of which produces inner peace,

remarkable joy, and a stubborn and persistent hope, not associated with any of life's circumstances.

In this season of the year devoted to fall festivals and harvest celebrations, we *can* allow the season to help us nurture these qualities, even as we pray that God would nurture them in us. And remember to read this text about the dreaming of dreams and seeing of visions; the pouring out of the Spirit; of earthly and heavenly wonders, and let it be taken together with other ideas from scripture;

Swords into plowshares,
A new heaven and a new earth;
The triumph of mercy over judgment;
Resurrection;

and let it shape our understanding of life, and nurture our faith in the eternal promise, beyond our wildest dreams.

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