

Scripture Reading for June 9th 2019

Joel 2:23-32 (NIV)

Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. ²⁴The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.

²⁵“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm—my great army that I sent among you. ²⁶You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed. ²⁷Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed.

²⁸“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. ²⁹Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

³⁰I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ³¹The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. ³²And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, even among the survivors whom the LORD calls.

Rom 10:9- 13 (NIV)

⁹ If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. ¹¹ As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³ for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Sermon: The God of New Beginnings

There's a familiarity to today's Old Testament reading for many Christians. That's because the apostle Peter's first sermon makes reference to this prophecy from Joel following the "birth" of the Church at Pentecost.¹ In fact, it's hard for us to see this Old Testament text in any other way. Today, however, I want us to consider this passage in three ways. First, how might it have been understood by Joel's contemporaries? Second, how did Luke through Peter's sermon reinterpret Joel's prophecy? And, third, what are we to make of this text today?

We don't know much about Joel, other than his name means, "The LORD [or YHWH] is God." He doesn't really introduce himself in his short book, and it contains few references to other people or events. Most scholars date the book between 400 and 350 BC, in other words, after the Babylonian exile and after Nehemiah had rebuilt Jerusalem during the Persian Empire.² There was, evidently, a great plague of locusts that ravaged the region.³ These were not uncommon in biblical times, and they can still wreak havoc today – I have seen the results myself in Africa. Joel tells us that the swarm *devastated* the harvest, including olive and fruit trees, and vineyards - *everything*.⁴ And the very mention of a plague of locusts brings to mind God's judgment against Pharaoh at the time of Moses.⁵ In keeping with the worldview of the time, Joel interpreted this tragedy as God's *judgement on his own* people.⁶ You see, God was deemed to be the source of both good times and bad.⁷ There is only one God, [YHWH], and Israel's covenant with him was such that *if* the people honored God, he would *bless* them with provision and security. But if the people worshiped other gods, then God would do the opposite.⁸ Famines, epidemics, and natural disasters, were seen to be from the hand of God, just as were invasions from foreign armies. The ultimate "curse" for disobedience to the covenant was *exile*, the forced removal from their homeland. In Joel's day, the Babylonian exile was within living memory.

If the severe plague of locusts was seen as divine judgement, what should the people do? Joel wants everyone, led by the priests, to pray, fast, repent and to return to faithfully worshiping of the one true God.⁹ Consequently, Joel announces the "Day of the LORD" is imminent¹⁰; God is about come in *judgement*. But Joel goes on to say: "Yet even now," the LORD says, "return to me with *all your heart*—with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Tear your *hearts*, not just your garments!" Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and boundless in loyal love—often

¹ See Acts 2.

² See Joel 1:13; 2:7,9; 4:18. The book also relies heavily on earlier prophetic texts, such as Obadiah, hence it was not written earlier than 500 BC. Having no precise date does not impact upon its interpretation.

³ Joel 1:4, 2:25. Joel describes the swarm in *militaristic* terms leading some to propose the locusts are a metaphor for real army that defeated the nation and ravaged the land. While possible, a real swarm of locusts is also quite plausible.

⁴ Joel 1:5-2:11. A land of plenty can all too swiftly be turned into a wilderness by a plague, and this in turn results in hunger, malnutrition, and death to both animals and humans.

⁵ Exod 10:1-20.

⁶ This is stated explicitly in Joel 2:25b.

⁷ See, for example, Isa 46:9–11; Ps 115:3; Prov 16; 19:21.

⁸ See Deut 28 and Lev 26 for the detailed (and incremental) list of "blessings" and "curses."

⁹ Joel 1:13-14, 19-20; 2:12-17. This is a familiar message of the Old Testament prophets, along with a plea for social justice.

¹⁰ Joel 2:1,11.

relenting from calamitous punishment. Who knows? Perhaps he will be compassionate and grant a reprieve. . .”¹¹

The people evidently do this as today’s reading informs us that the rains had begun again.¹² God had responded to the people with compassion. Joel writes that God declares: “Look! I am about to *restore* your grain as well as fresh wine and olive oil. You *will* be fully satisfied. I will never again make you an object of mockery among the nations.”¹³ In other words Joel is saying, “Do not be afraid, rather rejoice and be glad for there *will* a harvest because *God is with his people.*” What we therefore learn from Joel is that *God is the God of second chances*. Because God keeps his promises and is gracious, the repentant hearts of the people result in God fulfilling his side of the covenant relationship. Rejoice, then, not just for God’s provision – says Joel - but because the people’s relationship with God has been restored.

The pivotal word in the passage, indeed the whole book, is “afterward” when Joel writes: “And *afterward*, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”¹⁴ The word “afterward” signifies some *indefinite* time in the future. What Joel does is combines old-style prophetic literature with new-style apocalyptic literature and these few verses in our reading today are the hinge between the two genres. The coming of the Spirit will be a sign that the ultimate Day of the LORD is near. While Joel and the people celebrate God’s presence in their day, and hence the *final* judgement *delayed*, Joel goes on to say this present joy is nothing in comparison to what will eventually happen. As a sign that the end is near, says Joel, God will pour out his Spirit on all Jewish people.¹⁵ God will lavish his people with his presence and reveal himself through dreams and visions.¹⁶ The Spirit will not just be given to special people, like prophets, but to men, women, young and old.¹⁷ This does not mean *literally* everybody; rather, the Spirit will be given all kinds of people without distinction. The Spirit will enable a *direct* relationship with the living God; no longer will priests be required as intermediaries. Though this oracle is not unique in the Old Testament, Joel is way ahead of his time in making such claims!¹⁸

There is another important point. Religious practice was very public in those days; their faith could *not* be private or secret – as many want to see it today - since it was the whole nation’s collective covenant with God. The Jews proclaimed to their neighbors their worship of the one true God. Consequently, when bad things happen to God’s people, everyone interpreted that as a *public* judgement and shaming

¹¹ Joel 2:12-14.

¹² Joel 2:23.

¹³ Joel 2:19, 25-26.

¹⁴ Joel 2:28. This is also a fulfilment of Moses’ desire in Num 11:29.

¹⁵ This restriction to just Jewish people is implied; Peter’s (or Luke’s) re-interpretation of this in Acts 2 is universal.

¹⁶ Don’t forget that apocalypse means “unveiling” or “revelation,” hence visions and dreams are a sign of God’s presence.

¹⁷ The spirit of God in the Old Testament came *only* upon special people, like the judges, kings, prophets, and priests, often resulting in extraordinary feats of leadership, miraculous powers, and prophetic wisdom. The apostles (and others, e.g., Philip) displayed such qualities and actions, hence they followed in that mold. Moreover, the power of the creative and life-giving spirit (Gen 1:2; 2:7) can even bring life after death, as in Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones (Ezek 37:1–14.)

¹⁸ Although Ezekiel and Jeremiah have similar oracles; see Ezek 39:29; Jer 31:34.

from God himself!¹⁹ So when the LORD speaks through Joel saying, “My people shall never again be put to shame *because I am here amongst you*” – well, that *is* a very good reason to “fear not . . . be glad and rejoice”!²⁰ In the final day of judgement, Joel goes on to say: “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved – or will be rescued.”²¹ This is the ultimate good news. In this context, then, “Calling on the name of the LORD” means is to truly worship God alone and to depend on him for life.

You will recall this same message from last week.²² It is *no accident* that, in response to the jailor’s question at Philippi – “What must I do to be saved?” – Paul’s response is: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved!”²³ Paul is echoing Joel here, but notice how he redefines “Lord” to mean Jesus himself, rather than the personal Old Testament name for God [i.e., “LORD” or YHWH].²⁴ That is a remarkable - and a very important - shift in thinking!²⁵ Paul says the same thing in Romans 10, our New Testament reading: “If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. . . As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”²⁶ Paul not only echoes Joel, but he extends God’s grace toward non-Jews too. And he also makes it clear we are to tell others about our faith and what God has done!²⁷

This brings us to consider briefly what Luke reports Peter as saying in Acts chapter 2. You will recall that at that particular Pentecost celebration, the promised Holy Spirit came in power and the apostles spoke in other human languages and were then criticized as being drunk at 9 o’clock in the morning!²⁸ Peter explained to his fellow Jews that what they were witnessing was the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy.²⁹ But more than that, Luke *later* makes it clear that Joel’s oracle was *not* just God’s Spirit being poured out on *Jewish* men and women; God’s inclusivity now incorporates *non-Jews*, like Cornelius – and I

¹⁹ Joel 2:17,26-27. “Honour and shame” were social realities that shaped ancient Mediterranean cultures. Not just in the social pecking order of people, but as a nation - whether in exile or as a vassal kingdom with a puppet king paying taxes to the conquering ruler. Enemies often taunted and publicly mocked the national “god” of their subjected nations.

²⁰ Joel 2:26-27, 21.

²¹ Joel 2:32. Note 2:30-32 this is Joel’s transition to apocalyptic literature; “apocalypse” means “revealed” or “uncovered” – a (divine) “revelation.” It does *not* mean scary or judgement, nor ‘end-times,’ as often thought. Nevertheless, we should be prepared for earth-shattering events that can even tear the very fabric of a global society [Food for thought: Do we understand the “darkening of the sun and the reddening of the moon” to have been fulfilled on Good Friday (Mark 15:33), or are those promises still outstanding, to be fulfilled but before the final Day of the Lord (Luke 21:25, Rev 6:12), or both!?]

²² See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free.pdf>

²³ Acts 16:30-31.

²⁴ This is a *remarkable* shift in thinking for Paul, a former Pharisee (Acts 23:6; Gal 1:14; Phil 3:5,6), and for the early Church.

²⁵ But there is a clever word-play going on here. The *Greek* word for YHWH is *kyrios*, or LORD (in capital letters) as it is usually translated in our English Bibles. So, for a Jew to “confess that Jesus is Lord” is another way of linking God’s personal name (“LORD” or YHWH) with that of Jesus the Messiah.

²⁶ Rom 10:9-13, which also quotes Joel 2:32. (See also Rom 3:22-23, 29-30.) in 10:18, hear the echo of Joel 2:26b and 27b: “My people will never again be put to shame.”

²⁷ See Rom 10:10, Ps 105:1.

²⁸ Acts 2:1-13. “Pentecost” occurs 50 days after the celebration of Passover and is the “Feast of Weeks,” a Jewish celebration of the first fruits of the wheat harvest. Such symbolism is significant for Luke; this is the first fruits of the early Church. Luke frequently makes the connection between the Spirit and power – e.g., Acts 4:33; 10:38.

²⁹ Acts 2:16-21; 36-39. Recall that the Jerusalem crowd contained many Jewish pilgrims who lived throughout the Empire.

spoke about him 3 weeks ago.³⁰ Luke, Peter, and Paul *all* understood the coming of the Spirit in power as God doing a dramatic, history-changing thing.³¹ In this way Luke, like Paul, reinterprets and broadens the application of Joel's prophecy for *his* context. "Prophecy" is, then, not "foretelling" but "forthtelling." It is a *proclamation* of what God is saying and doing in a particular situation. Joel's oracle had meaning for *his* contemporaries and Luke, Peter, and Paul adapt it and still saw it as being relevant for *their* new situations.

The people's response to Peter's sermon was to ask, "What should *we* do?" and Peter replied: "Repent and each one of you be baptized,"³² which is another echo of Joel's message to the people.³³ The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was so pivotal that Christians see it as the beginning of a new era known as "The Last Days."³⁴ This not only means that God is *still* with us today by his Spirit, it also signifies – as Joel proclaimed – that the ultimate Day of the Lord is near.³⁵ And that is good news and nothing to fear for "*everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." What will one day be a future reality – namely God living among us³⁶ - begins right now. God does the saving, but we must allow ourselves to be saved or made whole. At this time, then, we live in a hope-filled era of Spirit-empowered mission and salvation, one that is available for *all* peoples - all those who will listen and respond to God's call.

And this brings us to the present; how are we to appreciate this message afresh today?

First, our understanding of God and his actions in the world has changed since Joel's day. Consequently, we do not - and should *not* - see natural disasters today as divine judgement. When tragedies happen, we should help to relieve suffering confident that in so doing we are doing what God desires, rather than going against his express will. Even so, while we need not fear God will strike us with lightning bolts (!), rejecting God – the source and goal of all life – has disastrous consequences in the long run, both for us as individuals and as a society. Consequently, and as Joel proclaimed, we *do* need to repent of the things that we do that are opposed to God and his ways, whether as individuals or as a nation. We saw signs of that this last week with Canada's public acknowledgment of the evils and injustice suffered by Aboriginal women; that's a start.

Second, Joel's portrayal of God as *the God of the second chance* is still valid. And not just the *second* chance, but of multiple opportunities for grace. What God *primarily* wants is *not* outward signs of devotion, such as coming to church regularly and giving of our time and money to causes that build up

³⁰ Acts 10:1-11:18. See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/God%E2%80%99s-Outside-The-Box-Thinking.pdf>

³¹ See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Helper-Is-Coming.pdf>

³² Acts 2: 37-39.

³³ Joel 2:12-14;32. (Obviously, baptism - as such - was not mentioned in Joel.)

³⁴ 1st century Jews thought history was divided into two periods of time: the *present age* and the *age to come*. The latter being the time when God would act decisively in history to judge evil, rescue Israel, and create a new world of justice and peace. The early Christians believed that although the full blessing of the coming age still lay in the future, it had *already begun* with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, and with the coming of the Spirit. In other words, the kingdom of God began to break into history with the coming of Jesus Christ.

³⁵ Recall that Luke was writing after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, so in his readers' minds there was a sense of expectancy that the end of history was near. See also Mark 13:7-8, 24-25; Luke 21:25-28; 21:25; Amos 8:9.

³⁶ See Rev 21:3 (indeed, the whole of Rev 21-22.)

the kingdom of God – important though they undoubtedly are. God wants you and me! As Joel put it, “Return to me with *all your heart*.”³⁷ God wants the *whole* of you and me, because he wants to relate personally with us all, so that we too may know and experience God’s presence in the midst of his people,³⁸ here at St Andrew’s on this Anniversary Sunday. So, just as some people like to celebrate a milestone Wedding Anniversary with a public renewal of their marriage vows, Anniversary Sunday – especially as this year it coincides with Pentecost - is a pilgrimage moment where we can rededicate our lives to God. In a very real sense, Joel’s message is for every age. Will we give our lives to Jesus afresh today – on Anniversary Sunday - and call upon the name of the Lord? As Joel says, “God is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and boundless in loyal love.”³⁹ God’s Spirit still calls us because God is still in the rescuing business. Being saved is both being saved *from* something and *for* something. Let us therefore renew our commitment in love and service to this God, with all of our heart and with the powerful help of the Spirit. Amen.

³⁷ Joel 2:12,13. See also Ezek 11:19; 36:26; Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10.

³⁸ Joel 2:27.

³⁹ Joel 2:13.