

Almost, Not Yet, Already?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

May 19, 2024 PM Sermon

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Joel 2:23-32

In our Scripture lesson tonight, we find the people of God in an almost, not yet, and already time. We don't know much about the immediate context in which Joel was written. Some scholars believe the prophet wrote in the ninth century BC, making Joel one of the earliest prophetic books; while others think Joel was written in the third century BC, making it one of the latest prophets, written long after the exile was over. Regardless, it is curious that specific details about the context and date are absent - many scholars suggest the lack of specific context makes the prophecy a timeless message; a message for any time. In other words, this is a message for us too.

A few words to set our Scripture lesson in context of the whole prophecy of Joel: we know that there has been a crisis; a plague of locusts in the land. The destruction from the locusts was catastrophic. Joel chapter 1 verse 4 describes it like this: What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten. These locusts sound like teenagers, eating everything in sight and leaving nothing behind.

The locusts destroyed vineyards and orchards, pasture lands and animals. There was no harvest, the granaries were empty. The communities were experiencing a food shortage and there was no produce to bring to the temple for offerings.

The people of God found themselves in a not yet season. Wondering how long they have to endure this destruction. Wondering when the locusts will leave so the land can recover. Starvation was a real possibility. Things were grim. The situation of sin and evil was serious and God had to deal with it. God's judgment was upon his people. The people were upset and did not know where to turn. Then here comes the prophet Joel, son of Pethuel, with a message for them: return to the Lord. Joel could not offer a promise that God would come to the rescue, but instead offered what he could: "Rend your heart," he said, "and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing – grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God." Those are Old Testament Scriptures. Joel reminded the people who God is.

Then part way through chapter 2, we learn that God has promised to restore the land. That's where we began reading tonight. The Lord responded to Israel's repentance. All the good things would be restored and the humiliation of God's people would be lifted.

Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Miserables*, published in 1862, was made into a musical for the Broadway stage in 1980. Both the novel and the stage production focus on themes of politics, philosophy, justice, religion, and love. Of the novel, one reviewer wrote, "The book which the reader has before him at this moment is, from one end to the other, in its entirety and details... a progress from evil to good, from injustice to justice, from falsehood to truth, from night to day, from appetite to conscience, from corruption to life; from beastiality to duty, from hell to heaven, from nothingness to God."

The particulars of the journey are unique for Hugo's different characters, but each one takes a journey from corruption to life. Set during the French Revolution, the second half of the stage production chronicles the journey of the working class. They courageously fight for their rights, setting up a barricade to protect what is theirs. But the National Army cannot be restrained and many people die upon the barricade. There is a beautiful lyric at the end of the stage production, when the audience gets a glimpse of heaven, and everyone who died at the barricade is singing:

Do you hear the people sing, lost in the valley of the night? It is the music of a people who are climbing to the light. For the wretched of the earth there is a flame that never dies. Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise. They will live again in freedom in the garden of the Lord. They will walk behind the plowshare. They will put away the sword. The chain will be broken and all men will have their reward. Friends, there is indeed something timeless and universal about waiting for all that is wrong to be made right.

Now not all waiting involves the righting of a wrong. Sometimes we wait with anticipation for good things to come in the middle of goodness. A growing family, for example eagerly anticipating a new baby. As soon as a woman receives the positive pregnancy test result, she is a mom. The baby is already here. It is a new little life.

As the days pass, that little life makes his or her presence known. Body aches, upset stomach, and a growing belly are signs that the baby is already here. But the baby is also almost and not yet here. Perhaps a family is counting down the days, that is an activity of anticipation. They must prepare the home and nursery for the baby, another clue that the baby is coming. There is a lot of joy in the almost and not yet season, anticipating the arrival of the baby. But maybe there is uncertainty too. The new little life is here, hidden from our sight. There is fear about what's going on inside; is the baby growing, is she healthy, is the mom's body healthy inside?

And then finally, nothing is better than the arrival. The baby is finally here. No more is that new little life almost here or not yet here, but he is here. Fully here. His family sees him, they feel him, they smell him, they hear him. He is as here as he can be.

Waiting through a season that is terrible is much harder. Like the poverty stricken hoping for change through revolution, or the cancer stricken hoping for no evidence of disease through treatment, or the abused hoping for justice. The story of God's people in Joel is for us too.

God's promise to restore the land was happening but not all the way happening. Sometime between 460 and 400 BC, the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt. So the situation in which Joel wrote involved God's promise coming true. God was indeed restoring the land that the locusts destroyed. A time of restoration was coming. In verse 23, rain is mentioned three times: restoration was coming in abundance.

The Lord promised to restore all that was lost in the years of the locust plagues and promised that his people would never again be put to shame. That promise must have sounded like hope to God's people. But there was a faraway not yet nature to that promise - flourishing, prosperity, and security that would never be interrupted. The flourishing of the full rule and reign of the Kingdom of God that was in the far distant future. But in that moment, the Lord said to his people: I am in the midst of Israel. I, the Lord, am your God. There is no other God. The prayers of the people have been answered already.

But God's people were still waiting. We know that from the future pointing word: Afterward in verse 28. The prophecy points ahead to a future time of even greater restoration. Through the prophet, God said, "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. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." God's people were used to the Spirit coming upon kings, priests, and prophets. But with those words, God declared a not yet time when the Spirit's outpouring would know no social limitation. It would envelop all.

The people who heard those words from the prophet never lived in that grand outpouring of the Spirit. But we know the occasion Joel was prophesying. We celebrate it today. Pentecost. I imagine many of us heard the Pentecost story already today. For those who haven't, hear now the beginning of Acts chapter 2: When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now the bystanders that had gathered were, rightfully so, perplexed and said to each other, "They must have had too much wine!" Then Peter decided that it was an excellent opportunity to preach, so he stood with the eleven other disciples and began: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!" Then guess what prophecy he recites? "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people." Yes. The word of God spoken by the prophet Joel.

People of God. We live in the same yet different place as the people who survived the locust plagues: God's promises are happening but not all the way; this is our story too, but we have Jesus. We have the Holy Spirit. Those days that Joel spoke about have come.

The time between the ministry of Malachi to the appearance of John the Baptist, what scholars call the Intertestamental period, was 400 years. The people of God knew what was coming, Isaiah had already prophesied earlier, sometime around 742 BC: A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a

Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious. In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the Mediterranean. The Messianic age, the time of the work of Jesus on earth, that Isaiah prophesied, wouldn't come for another 700 years. That is one long almost and not yet.

Then in verses 30-31 of Joel chapter 2, God seems to be talking about yet another day, the great and dreadful day of the LORD. That phrase, the great and dreadful day of the LORD, is used throughout the Old Testament and elsewhere in Joel. It's the day when the God of Israel will visit the earth in dramatic ways. Blood, fire, billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood. And one more promise: Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved. These final verses of chapter 2 are a movement toward the final age, the end of time, when all that we have seen and heard about, all the anticipation of the Kingdom of God will be fully realized.

And so, Church of Christ, we wait. We live between anticipation and realization. Sometimes that's exciting, like waiting for a baby to be born or waiting for our next birthday. Other times, we wait and hope. And always, we wait until the day when we no longer need hope. Such is the life of the church. Today is Pentecost. The church year began with Advent. We anticipated the birth of Christ, the coming of the Messiah. Almost. Not Yet. Then at Christmas, the Messiah finally arrived. Throughout Christmastide and Epiphany, we celebrated the light of Christ and the Kingdom of God finally arriving on earth. We observed Ash Wednesday and Lent, once more anticipating a turning point in the life of the church. During Holy Week we observed Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday. Then it's Eastertide and Ascension - Jesus is our risen Lord and King. Which brings us to today. And then back to our waiting until Advent. As New Testament people, we are waiting in the Already - the Kingdom of God has come. But we also wait in the Almost and Not Yet.

In her book, *Try Softer*, therapist and author Aundi Kolber reflects on her own story of childhood trauma that may never be reconciled. She writes: Heal anyway. Heal even though those who wounded you won't acknowledge it. Heal even though the grief can be grueling. Heal even though some won't support it. Heal because you matter. Heal because you're Beloved. Heal anyway. Perhaps this is exactly how we live in almost, not yet, already days.

You see friends, the story of God's people is that we are always in the midst of almost, not yet, and already. We are already Beloved. We already know that death is defeated. We already know that Christ has conquered. We already have the Holy Spirit. But we await the full rule and reign of Christ, the fullness of the Kingdom of God on earth, when all that is wrong will be made right.

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