

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 9, 2017

Call on the Name of the Lord

Joel 2:1-2, 12-14, 23-24, 26-32; Romans 10:8-15

*The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood,
before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord
shall be saved.*

As we arrive at the prophet Joel in our summer series on the Minor Prophets
I couldn't resist drawing a connection between this passage
and the full solar eclipse that will occur over South Carolina
on the afternoon of August 21st, this year.

At least I resisted printing the date of the eclipse beneath this Joel passage,
lest I seem to be predicting the coming of the Day of the Lord
on any particular schedule.

These days, we know why the sun will be turning to darkness in August,
scientifically speaking.

But the ancients had different ideas.

We get a glimpse into their understanding
at the site of the earliest recorded solar eclipse.

On a massive stone monument in Ireland
there are engravings depicting a full solar eclipse
believed to date back to the year 3,340 BCE.

Apparently, as indicated by the pile of bones discovered at the site,
this ancient community made human sacrifices on the occasion,
perhaps to save the Neolithic Sky God from dying
as he battled the darkness.

Greenville is taking a more festive approach,
with Greenville County even delaying the start of school
until the day after the eclipse.

South Carolinians and scores of international visitors
are making plans to view the spectacular celestial event here—
weather permitting, of course,
which is no guarantee on those thunder-storming days of late August.

For the prophet Joel,
the sun turning to darkness was no matter for celebration.
It was rather a portent, a warning of the calamitous day of the Lord.

Eugene Peterson,
whose best-selling translation of the Bible entitled "The Message"
reminds us that the prophets were poets who loved to use metaphor.
In other words,
we misread the prophets when we take them too literally.

So what exactly did Joel mean?

Well, probably not that the sun would be darkened by a natural event
like a solar eclipse or a sandstorm.
Joel is more likely making a poetic reference
to what happens when you torch a city and slaughter its populace.
When you look to heaven on that day
and the smoke of your burning city fills the sky and fills your eyes,
then *the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood*.

These portents are indicators that the final day of judgement is drawing near,
the Day of the Lord.

Joel predicts terrible suffering as Israel and the nations
are held to account

for the mess they have made of the earth.
If the nations thought they could get away with persistent injustice
and Israel with the neglect of their covenant with God,
on the Day of the Lord they will know otherwise,
and there will be hell to pay.

And everyone will be getting exactly what they deserve.

Yet, it does not have to be this way, says Joel. Even now, there is a way out.

*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 your clothing.*

*Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him...*

Here in the midst of this prophecy of doom,

Joel proclaims the essential character of God,
not as a God of pure vengeance,
unleashing wrath and exacting strict punishment without mercy;
rather, there is a deeper truth in the heart of God.

The prophet proclaims that God is and has always been

Gracious,

as when a superior shows goodwill to an inferior.

Merciful,

as the love of a mother for her child.

Slow to anger,

not immediately punishing the people for their sins
but patiently waiting for their repentance and turning.

Abounding in steadfast love,

adhering faithfully to the covenant of love with his people.

On these qualities of the divine character

God's covenant with Israel is established.¹

Yet even now, as bad as things are, says Joel,

this is the nature of God:

Grace, mercy, patience, and love
are what we find deep in the heart of God.

The Lord refuses to accept things the way they are,

and in his great compassion

God is determined to find a way for us to return
to the blessings of covenant life with God,
despite our persistent failure to be faithful in return.

To proclaim this reality in God's character:

that God's love runs deeper than God's wrath,

is what Joel means by
call on the name of the Lord.

You know, it's surprising that we don't read the prophets these days
any more than we do.

They really sound a lot like us,

in that they have a lot to complain about
regarding the state of affairs in the world.

Considering all the ink that is spilled,

and all the pixels that fill up all the screens,
and all the sound bites strung together in an endless mantra of criticism,
decrying the ills of modern culture, and national and international politics,
and the failures of organized religion,

it seems we would find these prophets to be kindred spirits,
and be drawn to them more than we are.

But if we were to spend more time with these faithful proclaimers,

we would find that after they have railed against and reviled
the injustice and unrighteousness of their world,

they always return to the deeper truth of the mercy of God,
and call upon the name of the Lord.

**This is because God has not abandoned them to the spirit of their age,
but has bestowed his own Spirit upon them.**

*Then afterwards, says Joel, speaking on the Lord's behalf,
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.
Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.*

**No matter how bad things on earth become,
God will continue to inspire a vision of a new world
that lives and moves in sweet harmony
with the beautiful music of God's love and justice.**

God will be active to save the world,
and God will make this saving work known
through men and women, young and old,
who proclaim to the world who God really is.

In the scriptures,
to *call on the name of the Lord* has many meanings:
it means
to worship God,
to acknowledge that one belongs to God,
and to depend on God for one's life,
but it also means
**to proclaim these things openly,
and to bear witness to the world,
that God is the ruler yet,
and God is the ultimate source of our life and salvation.**

This is what the **Apostle Peter** proclaimed on the Day of Pentecost,
when he drew upon Joel's words to interpret what was happening to the disciples
as they were filled with the Holy Spirit,
and began to speak in many different languages
and themselves began to *call on the name of the Lord*.

This is what the **Apostle Paul** proclaims in Romans 10,
to know the saving power of the God in Jesus Christ
that we need only *call upon the name of the Lord*,
and *confess* that name with our lips,
and *believe* that name in our hearts.

No matter how distressed you become over the events in your life
or the condition into which this world descends,
the Lord of mercy is not far away
and is waiting for you to turn and call upon his name.

And both apostles, Peter and Paul,
say that those who call upon the Lord,
themselves have a calling, as those who have received the Spirit,
to bear witness to this good news of God's readiness to save the world.

*How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?
And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?
And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?
As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'*

If we are ever tempted to think —
in these days of big national and international news stories,
and of glamorous celebrities on the screens and in the sports arenas —
If we are ever tempted to think
that our lives have no great, world-changing significance,
remember this:
the most significant thing that can be done in these turbulent days,
is for God's people to gather together in humble worship,
and to join our voices together to call on the name of the Lord,
and to declare what God has done for the world
**in Jesus Christ,
who entered into the chaos
as the Word of God in the flesh
full truth and grace,**
to declare it to the world,
and to tell it to our children, and our children's children,
from generation to generation.

When we gather to proclaim the name of the God of grace and mercy,
who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,
we become like the diamond of light that flashes in brilliance
in that moment the sun emerges from its eclipse
and begins to shine once again on the other side of the darkness.

It is no small or insignificant thing
for the people of God to gather
to call on the name of the Lord.
It is the only way the world will *know*
that God is in our midst,
and that the Lord is God,
and there is no other.

So may we never cease to gather
for this calling to be the community
of whom it can be said...

"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news."

¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Joel" in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol VII* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 318-19