



“Prophecy, Dreams, and Visions”

Sermon by Nathan Oney

Joel 2:23-32

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

Then 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. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. 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; 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.

I have found this week that my eyes are on local news far more than normal. Every moment presents another spectacle that has unfortunately become far too common. I watch, transfixed, as another fire tears through the hillside, and as people flee a natural hellscape. “This is the new normal,” said one commentator.

The stories that come out of these tragedies are just as engrossing as the visuals themselves. A mother drives through flame to save her daughter, a rancher hurries to let livestock free before fleeing himself, a young woman helps to evacuate her elderly neighbors.

The media also seem to relish in the aftermath as reporters appear at the charred husks of burned out houses, picking through ashes for items that may have survived. What will they find?

In the midst of all the TV coverage, I find myself reflecting on the gruesome spectacle of it all, and wondering why I just can’t seem to tear myself away. All the while I hear the words of songwriter Ben Gibbard in my ear, saying, “As the wind picked up, the fire spread, the grapevine seemed left for dead. And the northern sky looked like the end of days.”

The obsession with scenes such as this might give some explanation as to why many religious movements through time and across cultures have found themselves obsessed with apocalyptic “end-times” language such as that which we heard read this morning from the book of Joel: “I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth [says the Lord], blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” (Joel 2:30-31)

Fire and smoke. Darkness and blood. It is indeed a great and terrible day for any who experience it.

Now, an ancient commentator from the time of Joel could have indeed witnessed these things and, as our climatologists today have done about fires in California, said “here is the new normal.” By this point in history, the Jewish people may have begun to recognize that every new ruler from beyond their borders would covet their strategic location and ports, and would move to take them with force. The nation of Israel was not very powerful after all, not compared to the Egyptians, Syrians, Assyrians, Greeks, or Romans. They were conquered in sequence by nearly every power that came their way.

And so Joel writes this book of prophecy with the horrors of war on his mind, but Israel faces an even more immediate catastrophe, one that has its beginnings in a phenomenon very familiar to all of us here in California: a drought. Crops begin to dry up, the ground begins to crack, and something even more fearsome begins to form.

Rachel Nuwer, a wildlife reporter for the New York Times writes that “When the rains cease, [and] the leaves wither, [then] the hungry [grasshoppers] begin congregating in the last patches of remaining plant life. As the grasshoppers crowd together, something shifts.... The adults’ neutral brown coloring is replaced with a fearsome bright yellow.” Thus the Biblical plague of locusts begins. In shimmering swarms the size of Manhattan, they ride upon the winds, descending upon all remaining vegetation and eating up to the equivalent of what 42 million people would eat each day, eating until nothing remains. And then they move on. What began with a drought is now an unprecedented famine.

It is easy to see how such a nation-wide natural disaster could have stirred up in this ancient people all manner of theological questions. “Why?” the people ask. “Why did this happen?” It is the same question we ask when a family member receives a cancer diagnosis, when a child dies with so much life left un-lived. It is the question that we ask when the company starts handing out pink slips, and when violence enters our neighborhood. It will be the question we ask as the fires rage and the earth shakes.

And it is a question that ultimately, Joel seems uninterested in answering. That is probably for the best, isn’t it? When we face trials, illness, scarcity, the answers that we usually hear from well-meaning friends, relatives, and especially religious folk are usually not that satisfying. We might be offered some platitudes like “everything happens for a reason”, or “it was just her time.” Sometimes it is even worse than that. As I read about the fires this week, someone had the gall to say that this is God’s punishment on California for some unnamed sin.

Joel’s approach is much better. Instead of trying to explain the unexplainable or assigning blame, Joel simply says, “this suffering won’t last forever.”

There is fire and hunger now, but there will be rain, and plenty.

“Do not fear, O soil...
Do not fear, you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green! ...
O 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.” (Joel 2:21 a, 22a-b, 23)

The people looked to God for this rain just as we watch the weather reports hoping for good news today. Hoping that the winds will die down, that moisture will enter the air, that the temperatures will lower, and that rains will fall. And it is a certain hope that the rains will fall. God's mercy, it just so happens, endures forever.

But it is just as certain now, that the dry season will come again, that fires will rage year after year in this new normal. So Joel turns to a different kind of hope, a hope that involves God setting all things right once and for all in the fullness of time. Even more than pouring out rain, at that time God promises to pour out God's Spirit upon all flesh, without regard to any of our human distinctions. The result is something amazing: "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." (Joel 2:28b-d)

Prophecy, dreams, visions. When will God pour out the Spirit?

Friends, the church in the United States has honestly been experiencing what we might call a period of drought. In many ways it has lost its prophetic voice. To most ears it speaks no longer of what Dr. King called the "moral arc of the universe." To most ears it speaks no longer of justice, but only of power. To most ears it speaks no longer of racial reconciliation or of care for creation.

But our sons and our daughters are speaking. The youth of today speak with spirit-filled imagination and prophetic condemnation of all that holds us back from being the people crying out for justice that we are supposed to be. They say that the new normal—the new normal of climate change, the new normal of gun violence—is not acceptable any more.

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Now the experts tell me that the church has forgotten how to dream. They tell me that the church in the United States has retreated into the past and replaced dreaming of the future with nostalgia for the good ol' days back when every pew was full. And yes, it is good to remember those days. I mean, I was born in the 90s, so I can't remember those days, but I honestly love to hear about them. To me, it is hopeful.

But we can't only live in the past. So that is why I find it so wonderful to see the elders of this church coming together to dream of our future, guided not only by the past, but by the leading of the Spirit.

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You know, they say that young people these days don't have any vision. They say that we never look up from our phones. That we don't have any plans for the future. That we don't contribute anything of meaning.

But when I look around, I see young people envisioning new ways of doing ministry. I see young people with vision and passion and a desire to step up to be the leaders that the church needs now and for the future.

So, when will God pour out the Spirit? I can't help but think that we've received at least a sprinkle of this Spirit already. It isn't a surprise that when the Spirit descended at Pentecost in tongues of fire, that Peter remembered God's promise given through Joel, and declared hope to all nations. We are indeed called to be a spirit-filled people. We are living into the great Pentecost hope of the church, a hope founded on God's ultimate renewal of the world here, now, and yet working until the fullness of time when the heavens will burst open with life-giving spirit-waters.

And in all of this ongoing prophesying, dreaming, and visioning, the life-restoring love of God is pouring out from us in new and powerful ways. And that love is like water for the drought-ridden soul. To borrow an image from Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong: "If God is the source of love as I believe God is, then the only way you can worship God is by loving... loving wastefully... [The image is] the old sink in the basement. You plug up the drains and you turn on all the faucets and the water overflows the boundaries and goes all over the floor and fills up every crack and cranny, every dirty little space, and never stops to ask whether this crack deserves this living water."

The hope for restoration of the world comes through the love of God to each one of us, young or old; male or female; gay or straight; without regard for our ability, education, national origin, or social class.

This hope is our promise and our responsibility as those who have inherited the pouring out of the Spirit, that we will prophesy, that we will dream, that we will envision a world where the love of God fills up every crack and cranny.

And that is what we have been doing over these last weeks and months as we as we have been dreaming and envisioning a renewed future for our congregation, one of openness and love for all of God's children. We have dared to be filled with hope. And I pray that this love-inspired hope is for us, now and forever, the new normal.

All glory be to God. Amen.

