

The Whys and Wherefores of a Solemn Assembly

Ash Wednesday – February 17, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

*Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
in ages to come.*

*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,
a grain-offering and a drink-offering
 for the Lord, your God?*

*Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
 gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.*

*Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.*

*Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.
Let them say, 'Spare your people, O Lord,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
"Where is their God?"'*

The prophet Joel called to Israel, and he calls to us, *Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people.* And so we have gathered. One could call Lent a season of solemn assembly, and each year we begin this penitent season with Joel's call. Part of the glory of Joel's call to solemn assembly is that he makes very clear the purpose of such an assembly. We do well to pay careful attention to Joel's instruction, for out of habit we can go through the motions of Lent without remembering its deeper meaning. Joel explains rather thoroughly the whys and wherefores of the solemn assembly and his guidance to us is priceless. Not that we are ignorant of the meaning of Lent and the solemn gathering, but we always do well to remember and sharpen our understanding. And now is certainly a time which calls for a solemn assembly! Let us begin with the first and natural question, which Joel answers eloquently—*Why* this assembly?

In the book of Joel's prophecy, we are told of a very real threat to Israel's wellbeing. A plague of locusts had come upon them and their crops were being destroyed. This was a matter of life and death for ancient peoples, and Joel wanted them to gather before God while there was still hope. Such biblical passages remind us how blessed we are in our modern day as we are no longer so threatened by such things, but in these days, we have been painfully reminded that plagues are very real and still with us! The COVID virus has taken many lives and caused much loss and disruption, and the responses have been many and varied. For some, all talk of the virus is in terms of panic and fear. Others have reacted to such despair by acting as though the virus is harmless and that all is a hoax. The path of wisdom lies between these two extremes with a call to deepest concern, and yet confidence as we walk with our Savior. In times like these we must face the facts, both positive and negative. We are frail people living in a dangerous world, but we are also in God's loving hands. Now is a time to gather in sacred assembly and to call on God.

Joel stressed that this assembly should involve everybody. The call went out to young and old, and to the priests. His demand that the bride and bridegroom also join in was a way of indicating that there was to be no exemption to this call. In those days, newlyweds were exempt from military service for a year, but this was a war in which

all were needed! In days like these, Joel's time and ours, all should appear before God. We too often leave such matters of faith to Grandma, but this is not the way God sees it. (And yes, I am well aware of the limitations caused by the virus in matters of gathering, but let us all be sure to gather in spirit!)

Joel also reminds the people that this is a national crisis and that none should feel that it is not of concern to them. In any crisis there are those who are most vulnerable and there are those who manage to evade most of the damage. Some crops were completely devastated while another's may have been spared great harm. Some people and families are in less danger from the virus than others. Now is not a time for only the vulnerable and hurting to gather, but for all to join as one in prayer. Now is a time to pray, not merely for our own immediate circumstance, but for our neighbor, the wider church, nation and world. Joel also wanted the world to see God's mercy shown among His people so he prayed, *Let them say, 'Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?"'* Joel looked beyond the need for personal rescue, to the nation's wellbeing, and even beyond that to the glory of God among the surrounding nations. Joel had called for an assembly, and his purpose was clear: to gather as one to seek God in the face of a real threat.

Having addressed the why of such an assembly, Joel also answers the "*What question.*" *What shall we do when we gather?* Joel cuts to the core of the matter. *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.* The purpose of the solemn gathering is simple and clear. It is a call to return to a living and vibrant walk with God. The prophets were always calling Israel back to God. For some prophets such as Elijah, it was a call to a God's people at a time when they had actively rebelled and moved toward other gods. At other times it was a call of return to a people who had slowly and subtly drifted away from God, perhaps without even realizing it. As earth bound, fallen and naturally selfish people, Joel's message is always relevant as we regularly drift from God.

So how shall we return to God? Two methods are immediately mentioned: fasting and in mourning. Fasting is the practice of going without food, or some other deliberate deprivation for a period of time during which one seeks God in prayer. In calling us to mourning Joel is asking us to grieve over our sin and waywardness as we would be saddened by the death of a loved one. I would suppose that there are many other methods by which we can draw near to God, but there is also a word of caution in this command. Whatever method of drawing near to God which we choose can easily take on a life of its own and cease to be an effective avenue of return to God. I think of the once popular tradition of giving something up for Lent. The intent of such a sacrifice is to remind us of Christ's sufferings, especially in the forty days of temptation in the wilderness. This was also to be accompanied by additional times of prayer and

devotion. While this can be a wonderful act of worship which can draw one near to God, it can easily take a wrong turn. We hear of people giving up candy for Lent, only to learn that they are more interested in losing a few pounds and restoring their youthful figure than in drawing near to God. For some the season becomes one of self-congratulation as their ability to endure whatever deprivation is worn as a badge of pride. Joel was aware of this problem as he urged Israel to *rend your hearts and not your clothing*. In those days severe grief or repentance was expressed in the rending, that is, tearing, of their outer clothing. This was to be a sign of mourning. Note how Joel is concerned that this outward act be sincere and actually reflect true seeking after God. In fact, the prophet even seems to be ridiculing the outward act. Whatever our method of seeking God, whether it be through increased prayer, Bible reading, meditation and reflection, service or fasting, let it be genuine and sincere. Let us be real before God!

My suggestion for drawing closer to God is that we simply ask ourselves on a regular basis, "How can I be drawing nearer to God?" Pose this question to yourself many times though your day, and intersperse another question with it: How might I be drifting from God, and how can that be arrested? Keep asking this question, and keep on following God's leading.

Joel calls us to a solemn assembly and graciously explains why this is so necessary. He also tells us to return to God and offers a few pointers as to how this is done. Joel is wonderfully clear in his commands, and to these calls to seek God he adds words of hope. As I see it, Joel answers a question which most of us are too shy to ask. In a time of national crisis such as the one we know now, many wonder if gathering for worship and prayer will make any actual difference? Does a solemn assembly really accomplish anything other than making its participants solemn? Many look at such a religious gathering as little more than a nicety. Others have remarked that prayer is powerful and effective only as it helps us change our inner attitudes and feelings for the better. Prayer can indeed have a strong effect on our attitudes and feelings, but Joel would we horrified to hear it said that prayers to God were of no actual effect! The prophet makes it absolutely clear that God listens to our prayers, God cares and God acts. *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.* God holds our very lives in His hands. He cares and He saves! We too easily forget the many answered prayers in our own lives and too easily get caught up on the scientific thinking of our present day. And perhaps we are embarrassed to speak of our faith in a God who changes things at the request of His people. Let us believe, and let us not be ashamed.

Joel also mentions his hope that God *will leave a blessing*. More than just ending the plague of locusts, God just might turn some of this tragedy to good with an unexpected blessing. Perhaps we will eventually look back on this past year and rejoice in the good things which God gave us in spite of, and even through our sufferings. I can think

of painful times in my life which were eventually turned to blessing. Perhaps this will happen now. This past year has worn me down and I have trouble believing this glad possibility, but I will keep on seeking a deeper faith which dares to trust. Can we look ahead to restored ministry, here at St. Luke's and in our own lives? Joel wants God's people to pray and to have hope!

Our Lenten task is to draw near to God, particularly in this time of crisis. Let us keep Christ central in our lives and in our understanding of this pandemic and all our life worries. *Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.*