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Alexandria, VA 22310
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Luke 18:9–14
Joel 2:23–32

WHEN TIMES ARE TOUGH

If the company or the entity where you work couldn't secure contracts for the future, how would you feel? If people around you started to get laid off or furloughed, how would that impact you? How do you react when someone you supported, you believed in, maybe someone you voted for, acts more like a politician than a dedicated servant? Do you ever have that helpless sense about what is happening around you? Do you ever have that feeling of hopelessness that no matter what you try, things don't seem to change?

The prophet Joel steps on to our center stage during those times. It's almost as if he can read our thoughts, especially when things aren't going as we planned or when we have a sense of having no control over a situation. It's tempting at times, isn't it, to just throw in the towel or to give in to despair. But the prophet Joel is offering us another option—the option that is always available in God's promises.

When people disappoint us, God offers us the promise of the image of Christ to heal our relationships, the promise of humility, the promise of fidelity, and the promise of honest strength and effort to do the hard work, to pay the high price that reconciliation always exacts. When we are so lonely we could give up or so frightened we could run and hide, God promises us a relationship in Christ which bears the marks of his obedience, of his sacrifice, of his new covenant with us.

So, when times are tough, Joel says, God will send an early rain. When drought takes hold of a region, it does so ever so slowly. Little by little the environment dies, becomes dormant, hibernates. And in spite of the fact that we have a completely different understanding of how nature works than Joel did, if you've ever been in a parched region when it first starts to rain, the hope is irrepressible. It is just impossible not to be caught up in the mystery of that which is dead and seemingly lifeless coming back in all its beauty and all its vitality. You know that kind of optimism if you have ever been there—maybe in a forest after a fire when that early rain comes.

Yes, we have a different sensibility than Joel about our world and how it works, but the more you learn about how this world works the more amazing it becomes and the more convinced you are that it is God who restores our world. Rain brings optimism to a people who were devastated by locusts or by the collapse of their economy, by the obliteration of their way of life and their customs (maybe it really was insects, though it could have been invading armies). For them, their future is in doubt. It is sad. And to their hopelessness and despair, Joel says not only will God restore the bounty that was before, but afterward, after all that rebirth has taken place. "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Your old men shall dream dreams and

your young men shall see visions. Even on your male and female slaves in those days I will pour out my spirit.”

One of the blogs I read this week about Joel told the story of an eighty-year-old man in a remote part of Mexico who picks coffee beans for his living. Everyday he has to climb a mountain (crawl up a mountain) to pick the beans that have ripened over night. And every day he comes back down and eats out a meager existence. And then, every night he takes out his guitar, and the village people where he lives come to his front porch, and as he plays they dance. The person who witnessed this had to go through two translators to ask this man how he had the ability and the strength and the will to play for the village every night. Finally the response came, “We do not dance because of what we know. We dance because of what can be.”

Maybe that is the best reason to dance. What will be our response in tough times? I think it’s appropriate for us to lament. Lament is healing, especially when it takes on the qualities of prayer. And when prayer dares to fast, to be obedient and honest, then people can in fact replant and start over. Even with all the promise that Joel makes—all the prophecy about God’s character and fulfillment of what God plans to do in the future—people still have to go out and clear the field and plant the seed. They still have to harvest what is grown in their vineyards and their orchards. We still have to work for our lives to overflow from this liturgy, from this time together.

We can’t close off God’s promises in this room or in any temple. We can’t allow God’s goodness to only be limited to our prayer language. We have to plan and harvest and share with one another. I think that’s the key to the final stage of being transformed by a host: it’s to risk the sharing of what we long for, what we desire with others. When we live into hope in this way, every thought becomes captive to the power of the Holy Spirit, and every circumstance becomes infused with the very character of God’s promises.

If we are willing for God to make us aware first of how sad we can be of our sin that like a drought has crept back in little by little and parched our soul, then God can indeed send an early rain—a fresh reminder of grace and compassion and mercy. God can change us, reinvigorate us and give us new life, despite what we see happening around us. And like the old coffee picker, we can decide to dance—this wonderful dance of faith for what is still to be in our midst. “Even upon your male and female slaves ... I will pour out my spirit.” Amen.