

Joel 2:20-29
Oct 24, 2010

South Plains

Get Ready To Rejoice!

They say it's the little things in life that count. I have a new pastime that I find very relaxing. It's something that almost anyone can do and can enjoy a lot of personal satisfaction. I've never really gotten into watching swim meets before this year. But, circumstances afford everybody the opportunity to watch one particular swimming event where the competitors are known by their Latin name, *Euschistus servus*, or in plain English, the stink bug. The great thing about stink bugs is that they love to swim. Place them vigorously in the toilet bowl and they will provide you with entertainment for hours. Whenever the stresses and strains of life threaten to spoil your disposition, catch a stink bug, toss them in the water and watch them swim.

The invasion of stink bugs in central Virginia gives us only a whiff of what Israel endured in the time of the prophet Joel. Israel was invaded periodically by locusts and grasshoppers. We know this not only from scripture. In 1915, Palestine was overrun with locusts. There were so many that the only cure was to wait for a windstorm to drive the insects into the sea. Witnesses said the rotting bodies of dead locusts piled up so high on the beach that they created a stench "putrid and vile." That's the background for the book of Joel, a plague of locusts from the north that destroyed crops and trees and grass. It

was a disaster, literally of biblical proportions, a disaster described as if it's a military invasion from the north.

The first part of the book of Joel rehearses the disaster. The second part, where our reading begins, lays out the promise of God's help.

I will remove the northern army far from you,
and drive it into a parched and desolate land,
its front into the eastern sea [Dead Sea],
and its rear into the western sea [the Med];
its stench and foul smell will rise up.
Surely he has done great things!

Redemption will include all the created world:

Do not fear, O soil;
Be glad and rejoice,
For the Lord has done great things!
Do not fear, you animals of the field,
For the pastures of the wilderness are green;
The tree bears its fruit,
The fig tree and vine give their full yield.

Joel's description of God's help is quite specific for an agricultural economy. Animals and crops will flourish because rain will revive the parched land. Spring rains and autumn rains will insure such a bountiful harvest that the graneries will be full and the great vats hewn from stone for the grapes and olives will overflow with wine and oil. The prophet drives home the point that the blessings of the Lord God of Israel are not vague feelings of spiritual happiness, a dreamy disconnection from

reality. God knows us, knows our creaturely needs and wants, knows the pangs of hunger we experience, the pleasure of a cup of wine, the satisfaction of rest after a hard day's work. God created us this way and cares about our physical ups and downs. God knows the Israelites need to get rid of those locusts.

Salvation means good things. Therefore, God's salvation for us is often very tangible. We get the job. Our stomachs are full. Life is comfortable.... Not always and certainly not for everyone. But, for most of us here this morning the blessings of God have been felt and tasted and enjoyed. We have reason to be grateful. God is good. There's no better way to start stewardship season than by thanking God for all we've received.

When I look around and see the disadvantages of so many people – homeless families facing another Virginia winter without shelter, children orphaned in Africa by war after war, women trapped as sex workers around the world – I have to ask the unanswerable question: why me? Why are we so blessed? We cannot answer that question, but we can respond to it with thanks to God above. We can respond with generosity, joining God in caring for others as good stewards.

We can also imitate God in giving. There are two reasons I see in Joel's prophecy that explain God's motivation behind the giving of these blessings: God's love and God's faithfulness. Love may be easier for us to understand. When we love someone, we want to help

them, to relieve them of distress, to head them in the right direction. The psalmist sings,

The Lord is good;
His steadfast love endures forever (100:5).

Scripture sprinkles evidence of that lovingkindness throughout the Old Testament and brings it to a climax in the New with the teaching and example of Jesus. Where Joel tells of the early and later rain that blesses the earth, Jesus tells us that his heavenly Father "sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (Matt 5:45)." God's expansive love stretches to cover us all. At the end of all our speculation about the beginnings of the universe, we have to wonder why the world was created at all. For believers, the only explanation is the unconditional, unexplainable love of God, a parent's love for the child. That's the easy to understand motive for creating and sustaining us.

Less easy for human beings to identify with is the faithfulness of God. We see examples of loyalty and promise keeping in the world that are exceptional. We had a neighbor in North Carolina infamous for multiple affairs and downright meanness. But, when he became bedridden, his wife nursed him through those final years of his life. Their children thought she was crazy, but she had promised "for better or worse, in sickness and in health." Unfortunately, that kind of faithfulness is the exception, not the rule for most of us. We are more inclined, if not to be vengeful, at least to take care of

ourselves first rather than sacrifice for the sake of keeping a promise to someone undeserving.

God's not like we are. God keeps promises. "I will be their God and they will be my people," says the Lord. Regardless of what we people may do in our failure to keep our covenant with God, God keeps God's end of the bargain.

I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.

And my people shall never again be put to shame
(2:27)

One of the taunts that ancient people exchanged went something like this:

When Israel was on winning, they would shout: "Tell your idols to come and help you." The most famous taunt was when Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. They couldn't get Baal to do anything so Elijah mocks them, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has gone to attend to bodily needs,... or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened (1 Kings 18:27)." Elijah shamed the worshipers of Baal.

In Joel's prophecy, the Lord promises, "My people shall never again be put to shame." Now, there is a time warp. Prophets never can keep the future and the past straight in their prophecies. Joel's enthusiasm bleeds over into the end time, the great Day of the Lord when history comes to the climax of judgment and grace.

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.

Those are familiar words from the Day of Pentecost in Acts. Peter quotes Joel to explain the gift of the Holy Spirit falling upon the followers of Jesus.

Joel's point is that the blessings we experience in prosperity, a good harvest and a fruitful land, are only a foretaste of the coming kingdom of God. We experience a similar foretaste of the kingdom with every baptism. The promises we make to one another will not be fulfilled completely until the end of time. In the meantime, we'll surround Evangeline and other baptized believers with love and care, as faithfully as we can. The affirmation of faith we make professes those things we want to believe from here to eternity. In the meantime, we trudge forward with the best faith we can muster.

The happiness we experience at the baptism of a child is tempered by the realization that a lot of water will run under the bridge before the child grows up. In the meantime, we're rejoicing in the pleasure she gives us today.

But, baptism is so much more than our happiness today. Baptism promises joy to come – the presence of the Holy Spirit, life free of guilt, belonging, acceptance, purpose and meaning, inheriting not only a tradition, but also a future filled with universal joy when God "will pour out [his] spirit on all flesh." Whenever you see the baptismal font, get ready to rejoice, because the

blessings of a baptism is only a foretaste of the blessings
of the kingdom of God.