

“Living in the Longing”

Second Sermon in the Advent Series: *Do Not Be Afraid*

Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

New Revised Standard Version

In 2007, Singer-songwriter John Mayer won a grammy for his song, *Waiting on the World to Change*:

“Me and all my friends / We're all misunderstood / They say we stand for nothing and There's no way we ever could / We see everything that's going wrong / With the world and those who lead it / We just feel like we don't have the means / To rise above and beat it / So we keep waiting (waiting) / Waiting on the world to change

When you trust your television / What you get is what you got / Cause when they own the information, oh / They can bend it all they want / That's why we're waiting (waiting) / Waiting on the world to change

It's not that we don't care / We just know that the fight ain't fair / So we keep on waiting (waiting) / Waiting on the world to change / We keep on

waiting (waiting) / Waiting on the world to change”¹

Perhaps you resonate, at times, with those lyrics. Waiting and wondering when the world will change. But what would happen if we ALL just sat back and waited for the world to change or for our marriage to change or our church to change or our own attitude to change? As relatable as this song can be at times to how we feel, John Mayer's kind of waiting is not an Advent kind of waiting. For that – we turn to the prophet Joel. Joel is not waiting on the WORLD to change. Joel is LONGING for the hearts of the people to change, because he knows, then and only then, will the world change.

We don't know much about the prophet Joel, but the few things we do know stand out. First, unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, Joel isn't skeptical about worship.² He believes in the

¹ John Mayer, “Waiting on the World to Change” *Continuum* (2006); album released on August 1, 2006.

² Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn Schifferdecker, “NL Podcast 428: Joel: God's Promised Spirit - Dec. 6, 2020,” *Working Preacher* (29 Nov.

power of coming before God as a community to gather, to blow a trumpet, to fast, to mourn, and to weep, to repent and to return to the presence of God as a collective – to bask in the gracious mercy of a God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and who does not want to see the people punished or perishing (Joel 2:13). In this short book, Joel shows us that just the act of worshipping and repenting, is a prophetic act in and of itself. Especially in a time when the people seem to have such short-term memory about who God is and how God has carried them through the worst of times even when they were on their worst behavior.

And second, Joel is the only book that is devoted entirely to poetically describing the utter devastation of a national crisis.³ He describes a plague of locusts as destructive as a military ambush, except that this plague does not just destroy human life, it destroys all of creation –

the soil and the seeds and the plants and the animals. Joel lays bare for us images of what a world reeling from natural disaster looks like. Listen to how the book begins:

“The word of the Lord that came to Joel: Hear this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has SUCH A THING happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation. What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. The priests mourn. The fields are devastated, (even the) the ground mourns; The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, palm, and apple—all the trees of the field are dried up and joy [is

2020), accessed on Dec. 4, 2020 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/nl-podcast-428-joel-gods-promised-spirit>.

³ Rev. Cathy M. Kolwey, “Reflections on Joel 2: 12-13, 28-29 and Luke 11:13,” *RevGalBlogPals* (30 Nov.

2020), accessed on Dec. 4, 2020 at <https://revgalblogpals.org/2020/11/30/narrative-lectionary-a-crisis-with-unique-perspective/>.

withering] away among the people.” (Joel 1:1-4, 9-10, 12).

Unfortunately, we don’t have to stretch our imaginations to understand Joel’s writing. Whether it’s locusts or a virus, the ground moaning or global warming – destruction is destruction – no matter what era it’s in.

2020 is definitely a year we will tell our children about and our children’s children and they’ll tell their children. But beyond how we’ll tell this story in the future, right now in the here and now it just feels like one thing piling on top of another, doesn’t it? Like we just can’t catch a break. Just as the next variant of locust eats up whatever scraps the previous locusts left behind – if a global pandemic isn’t enough (where our country’s daily average of Covid-19 deaths right now is 1,654⁴ – the equivalent of losing the 3,000 lives lost on September 11th EVERY OTHER DAY for MONTHS on end) – if that’s not enough,

⁴ Jason Hanna and Madeline Holcombe, “US Covid-19 hospitalizations set another daunting record at 100,667,” *CNN* (4 Dec. 2020), accessed on Dec. 4,

we also have quarantine and isolation to deal with, exhausted medical and first responder personnel, economic devastation, racial injustice, political chaos, and climate change leading to forest fires in the west, wind storms in the midwest, hurricanes along the Gulf Coast. Plus whatever else you might have going on in your personal life.

If the prophet Joel is speaking to a people of the plague – then he is speaking to us. The devastation is physical, material, natural, economic, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. What tiny glimpse of hope one locust doesn’t eat up, the next locust (the next problem) comes along to eat that up too.

And to rub salt in an already very sore wound, 2020 was supposed to be a year of revisioning and new beginnings. Do you remember Oprah’s 2020 Vision tour? I do because Damon actually got to meet Oprah, but that seems like

2020 at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/03/health/us-coronavirus-thursday/index.html>.

years ago, not months ago!
Everyone was so excited for 2020. Similarly, for the people of Joel's day, this was supposed to be a new era of celebration for them. The Israelites had been in captivity for seventy years under Babylonian rule. When the Persian Empire conquered the Babylonians, the Jewish people were allowed to return to Jerusalem – finally – to rebuild the Temple and it was to be a time of new beginnings and hope – and now *this!* Locusts destroying their lives?! Locusts?! Some scholars think the locust plague was metaphorical for a political or military attack; other scholars think the opposite, that it really was locusts but it was more relatable for people to understand a military attack, so war language was used as the metaphor – Joel does switch back and forth between the two – but no matter what's causing the devastation – it is devastating. The cause is almost irrelevant at this point. What matters is the response. How to move forward. What to do now.

So here's Joel, standing in Jerusalem. The temple has been rebuilt, the people have been restored to their grandparents' land, and yet, there's still something wrong. The world is still filled with war and famine and destruction...all the same stuff that was around them in exile. They thought if they could just get back to Jerusalem, if they could just get out of exile and find their way home, then all would be well. But as we know, just because you are home, or spending all your time quarantined in your home, that doesn't mean all is well. Waiting or wishing for one thing and seeing it happen, doesn't mean there's not gonna be something around the next corner that you begin waiting and wishing for all over again. Which is why our faith teaches us that simply "waiting and wishing" isn't enough.

There are a lot of days where I feel like Joel. When I look around and instead of seeing all the joy and hope and good stuff – I look around and think, what is going on? Why is the world

this way? So much suffering, hurt, and pain? Why?⁵

When we ask these kinds of questions, we're doing something more than just waiting. We are **LONGING**. Waiting usually implies passiveness or an absence of control or agency (like the John Mayer song), but longing speaks to something deeper down within us – that feeling that tells us that the world should not be the way it is now. Longing involves an inkling or a vision that we've been given that there is **SOMETHING** more.

Once a dog realizes there's a whole world outside his backyard, the backyard simply doesn't cut it anymore. He sits by the back gate and longs to go for a walk because he knows there are more smells and more adventures out there, beyond what he can see and know in his own backyard. Similarly – just the fact that we're dissatisfied with how the world

is right now means that somehow and somehow we've been given the insight and inspiration to know that **THIS** is not all there is. There is more. We long for something more, something better, something more just, more whole.⁶

Christmas gives us a glimpse of this “something more” – a babe in a manger, but Advent invites us into this kind of longing for what we know could be, even though we're not quite sure what it is yet in all its fullness. Our passage in Joel speaks to both the vision for which we long and one of the spiritual practices that'll help us get there. First, the vision.

The vision is for a time when every person is seen, every voice is heard, every life is valued as beloved. A time when sons **AND** daughters shall prophesy, a time when **OLD** men and **YOUNG** men shall dream dreams, a time when even the enslaved and

⁵ Steve Thomason, “Return to Me | A Sermon on Joel 2:12-12, 28-29 | Advent 2,” *Steve Thomason: Following the Cloud* (21 Dec. 2012), accessed on Dec. 4, 2020 at

<https://www.stevethomason.net/2012/12/21/return-to-me-a-sermon-on-j Joel-2-advent-2/>.

⁶ Thomason, *ibid*.

oppressed are free to dream and live out of the Spirit that God is pouring on them – this is the reality for which we long in Advent...and the time for which we must actively be preparing for and participating in by helping to create it.

The word Advent actually means “coming” or “arrival,” which conveys some urgency, right? We call Advent a season of waiting; I say that all the time myself, but I don’t think waiting is really the right word. It’s more a season of longing and getting ready. Have you ever known expectant parents just to sit around and wait for their kid to come without doing anything to prepare for their arrival?

The minute you know a baby is on the way, your life completely changes; it reorients toward preparing for that child. You may not know how the birth or adoption process will go, you may not know what the child’s name will be or how their personality will shine or how their sleep patterns will completely baffle you – but you

do know that you need to create an environment for that child to thrive. So you start planning and preparing. You baby proof your house so there’s less opportunity for injury or harm. You buy things that you wouldn’t need otherwise – like a crib, a bouncy chair, a high chair, a car seat, a monitor, a white noise machine, a whole range of products and technologies and vitamins and books and the list goes on and on. In those preparations, your goal is not to control your child or predict and preset how the child will live and move and have their being in the world. In those preparations, your intention is to create the most optimal environment that you can so that the child has both the safe parameters they need AND the exploratory freedom they need to develop and grow into their best self.

Out of ALL the methods and ways God could have chosen to enter the world in human form, it is ultimately a mystery as to why God chose to meet us on earth as a vulnerable baby – with needs that only other

humans could meet, but perhaps the reason God chose this method is because the birth of a baby is NOT an immediate “fix” to all the world’s problems for humanity. Not even close. The birth of a baby actually demands MORE from us as humans, and stewards, not less.

Just as parents do not passively wait for a child to arrive, and just as when that child arrives, the care of that child actually demands more of them, not less --- so too, does the birth of the Christ-child demand more from us than just passively waiting for a miracle. Our lives should be turned upside down and reoriented toward a whole new focus in this season.

The prophet Joel believes in the people’s preparation and participation in the work of God too. And one of the key spiritual practices which will help us get there Joel says, is repentance. This repenting - which means “turning to” - this “turning to” God this Advent season is an invitation to get prepared, to get ready, to

activate that longing within us that wants the world to be better and to begin now to make changes within our own lives and environment so that the new gift God gives us on Christmas – the presence of Godself in a new way – can thrive and grow in our lives and our world. Just as a home goes under changes to prepare for a baby to arrive, our hearts must go through changes to prepare for Christ to be born in our lives anew.

We must change OUR hearts and ways of thinking, and we must start with ourselves. We are the world, and so the world won’t change until we do. We must gather, even as we are now, to remember God’s steadfast mercy and graciousness and forgiveness and love and act from a place of wanting THAT to be what multiples in the world, not locusts or viruses or flames or wars or hate crimes. But those gifts of love and mercy and grace cannot multiply without us being vessels for, or carriers of, those gifts. The fruits of the Spirit that Christ brings us –

they need an optimal environment to grow and thrive. This is the meaning of the incarnation, right? That God chose US – you and me – to be the way in which God enters the world and changes the world and builds the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

You’ve probably heard the quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, “*Be the change you want to see in the world.*” He never actually said those exact words. What Gandhi said was this: “*We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our [hope and peace]. We need not wait to see what others do. [We start with ourselves.]*”⁷

⁷ Joseph Ranseth, “Gandhi didn’t actually ever say ‘Be the change you want to see in the world.’ Here’s the real quote...” JosephRanseth.com (27 Aug. 2015), blogpost accessed on Dec. 4, 2020 at

One scholar says this about Gandhi’s teaching: “He was guiding us to do the inner work that we often shy away from; the inner change beyond simply wishing or visualizing. Reading the original quote, one could understand how or why we might paraphrase what he said down to “be the change you want to see in the world” but doing so only gives us part of the story. The real change comes when we go within and do the work of inner transformation. To examine ourselves openly, honestly, vulnerably and to purge out any resemblance of selfishness, depravity, or insecurity.”⁸

The prophet Joel might say it this way: the real change comes when we rend our hearts, and not our clothing, when we return to God, to the presence and essence of love, graciousness, and mercy in our world, and turn away from the thoughts and actions that cause punishment and pain. When we

<https://josephranseth.com/gandhi-didnt-say-be-the-change-you-want-to-see-in-the-world/>.

⁸ Ranseth, *ibid.*

take responsibility for moving toward God even as God is already and always moving toward us.

You see, even as the miracle of birth is a God-given miracle, we as humans are not APART FROM that miracle. We are a PART OF that miracle. Parents do not celebrate their child's arrival then go on autopilot and sit back and wait for that child to fill their lives with joy. No, they dive in and dig deep to do all they can to create an environment for that child to thrive and in all of the inevitable challenges and struggles – there is great joy and love to be born. So it is with us and Christ.

You see, we are crucial to birth of Jesus. Just as Mary and Joseph and their community had to raise up the boy Jesus to be a man – we must raise up and nurture the presence of Christ in our lives to be fully human.

As the people of God, we are not waiting on the world to change, we are longing for the

Christ-child to change the world. And the Christ-child cannot change the world, unless we first let him, change us.

Amen.