

All Creation Gives Thanks

Joel 2:21-27

Common English Bible

21

Don't fear, fertile land;
rejoice and be glad,
for the Lord is about to do great things!

22

Don't be afraid, animals of the field,
for the meadows of the wilderness will turn green;
the tree will bear its fruit;
the fig tree and grapevine will give their full yield.

23

Children of Zion,
rejoice and be glad in the Lord your God,
because he will give you the early rain as a sign of righteousness;
he will pour down abundant rain for you,
the early and the late rain, as before.[a]

24

The threshing floors will be full of grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and fresh oil.

25

I will repay you for the years
that the cutting locust,
the swarming locust, the hopping locust, and the devouring locust have
eaten—
my great army, which I sent against you.

26

You will eat abundantly and be satisfied,
and you will praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has done wonders for you;
and my people will never again be put to shame.

27

You will know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I am the Lord your God—no other exists;
never again will my people be put to shame.

Like the story of Hannah that we heard last week - and like many stories of God's ongoing work of salvation throughout the Bible, the story of Joel's community is one of a single instance of deliverance from a crisis that becomes part of the larger, grander story of God's dream of salvation for the entire Cosmos.

Salvation is a tricky word these days - but in Hannah and Joel's contexts, and in my own theology - salvation is not about being saved from eternal damnation when we die but about being pulled from suffering and chaos into the abundant life God wishes for all people right. Salvation isn't something that will happen sometime in the future but a tangible, immediate transformation of a person or a community.

Joel's community has suffered from a plague of locusts more devastating than anyone can remember or could have imagined. Joel describes it like this:

“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 crops have been demolished, the pastures where the livestock feed have been devoured, the waterways have dried up. The entire landscape has been laid to waste. The people, the animals, the ground, the forests - all cry out to God. Joel and his neighbors fear that the locusts are a sign of God’s wrath and impending judgment and they do not know where to turn.

And Joel - as much a pastor as he is a prophet - remembers the words of those who have gone before him. He remembers his own experience of the Divine Presence and he steps out in faith to reassure his people that God is gracious and merciful. He preaches a word of challenge and of comfort - telling them “when you don’t know where to turn, turn towards God.” He calls every one of them - babies and elders, newlyweds and priests - to gather for fasting and prayer. He encourages them to lean into God with their whole hearts. Who knows, he says, God just might hear us and come to save us. Not because of what we have done but because of who God is.

And their prayers are answered. God's promise of deliverance is as extravagant as the locusts were destructive. An abundance of rain will fall, the grain will fill the threshing floor, the wine and oil will overflow their vats. Abundant life - the abundance that God intends for all creation - will be restored and the people and the land and the animals will all be saved.

But wait. There's more. Joel - remembering the stories of the ancestors, knows that God weaves every individual story of salvation into God's ongoing project of Cosmic Restoration - what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. He knows that God's love and faithfulness for Joel's community is a small part of the story. He sees a day when God's Spirit will be poured out upon every single person on the earth - every age, every gender identity, every economic status. Someday, Joel promises, every aspect of creation will give thanks together when God's Dream of Abundance for All is finally realized. Until then, he says, tell the story of what God has done for us. Remind all the generations to come of who God is and how much God loves God's people. Encourage them and tell them that when they don't know where to turn, turn towards God.

Joel's prophecy of The Spirit's radical inclusiveness has the honor of appearing in the first recorded Christian sermon - preached by Peter on the streets of Jerusalem on the morning of Pentecost. It is a sermon that testifies that God's project of Salvation continues in the life, death and

resurrection of Jesus and in the birth of the church. It is a story of suffering and deliverance, a story that God is weaving into the larger, grander story of God's Cosmic Salvation.

The story of the first Thanksgiving is also a story of suffering and deliverance. One part of the story has made it into the canon of American History while another part - perhaps the most important part - has been glossed over or even ignored.

The Pilgrims arrived at the site that would become Plymouth, Massachusetts in the early winter of 1620. The majority of the settlers spent the winter onboard the *Mayflower* - and less than half of the *Mayflower's* original passengers lived to see their first New England spring.

In March of 1621, those who survived moved ashore to begin the work of establishing a village. Shortly afterward, they met Tisquantum (commonly known as "Squanto"), the last survivor of the Patuxent people, who, miraculously, greeted them in English and who helped them begin to navigate the unfamiliar forests and soil of New England and to forge an alliance with the Wampanoag tribe that would last 50 years. That November, to celebrate their first successful corn harvest, the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag shared a feast and festival that lasted three

days. One of the colonists who were there later wrote: “And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.”

Tisquantum had come from a story of tragedy and deliverance himself - he had been kidnapped by an English explorer sometime in the early 1600s who took him to Spain and sold him into slavery. Tisquantum escaped to London where he learned English and eventually made his way home in 1619 on an expedition ship - only to find that his entire tribe had been wiped out by an epidemic infection. With his people gone, Tisquantum was taken in by the Wampanoag tribe. One year later, the Mayflower landed in Massachusetts Bay.

I imagine it would have been easy for Tisquantum to hate the Pilgrims - people who shared the national identity of the man who had kidnapped him. Instead, Tisquantum leaned into connection and became a key person in their survival - one who was able to broker one of the only lasting and peaceful alliances between the European colonists and the Indigenous peoples.

I wonder what would have been different if the colonists had maintained the humility they had that first harvest. If they, like Joel, had insisted on telling the whole story of their deliverance - including the story of

Tisquantum and the other indigenous people who sacrificed their time and energy, shared their knowledge, and welcomed the colonists as neighbors. Would they have realized, as Joel did, that any “deliverance” that comes at the expense of another is not part of God’s plan for us but is, instead, a hindrance to the work that God is doing?

The stories we tell and the stories we ignore matter. They are part of the vision we cast for our future.

The deliverance of just one community or one person is a miracle - but even those miracles are too small for God who works each miraculous story of deliverance into the larger, grander story of salvation.

Of course, God loves you - and each and every person other who lives, who has lived, or who will live. God also loves this earth - and every creature, plant, and fungi; every rock, every body of water, every particle of air. God loves the entire universe - every planet, moon, star, solar system, and every galaxy, every black hole, every comet, every vast and empty space. The Entire Cosmos - the known and unknown, the imagined and unimaginable - belongs to and is loved by God. And anything less than the Restoration and Salvation of it all is much too small.

We, like Joel and his community, are in the midst of a crisis unlike any in living memory. We have also, like Joel, seen God's presence among us in our gatherings online and in person, we have reached out to one another and to our wider communities and felt God working in and among us to create stories of deliverance and salvation in large and small ways.

Gleaning for local food banks, stuffing backpacks for children experiencing food insecurity, working with our colleagues and neighbors as GHIAA to abolish laws that keep people in bondage and pass laws that break those chains. We have watched our youth grow into loving adults and our children mature into young people with a mission. In a time when it has been hard to know where to turn, we have done our best to turn towards God.

In the coming weeks, we will have the opportunity to hear and to tell stories of grace and deliverance in the midst of COVID. We will have opportunities to hear and share stories about our hopes and our struggles as we look towards what it means to be South Church in the generations to come.

We will begin to decide which stories will cast a vision for our future that harmonizes with God's Dream of Abundance for all. Which stories will we tell to our children and our children's children? Which stories do we yet want to create?

As we gather around abundant tables this week, let's hang on to the stories that point to God's ongoing project of Cosmic Salvation. Let's remember that each moment of grace that we have experienced is meant to be woven into that larger, grander story of the Kin-dom of God. And when we find ourselves in those moments where we don't know where to turn, let's turn toward's God. Leaning into God's Grace with our whole hearts and asking God to weave us into God's Kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven when All Creation Will Give Thanks Together. Amen