



10-23-22 Gratitude Sunday

Joel 2: 23 -32

Enough

Prayer: O God we thank you for the pain and joy of human experience recorded long ago and given to us now in scripture. May your spirit rain upon us as we listen for your word. We seek not just to hear, but also to understand, and not only to understand, but to believe...



This image is of water and its effects, rain on a body of water, with rings moving outward, everything green and growing, was painted in 1875 by Gustave Caillebotte. For me, the green of the environment contrasts with the drought we had this summer. My home state of Oregon still has a major wildfire burning out of control. The fire is in a remote area where there are no homes or roads, so it's not making headlines right now. But it's burning. People need to wear N95 masks outside due to the smoke in most of the state. The native americans in that part of the country used to do controlled burning to manage the forest. We have been preventing wildfires for generations now, and with the increased brush understories when it begins to burn, it can't be controlled. Like me, everyone who lives out west has been yearning for a soaking rain...like this one rendered 150 years ago, by an artistic soul.

The prophet Joel talks about the weather but it isn't really about the weather – you may have personal feelings about a rainy day, an ice storm, or a snow day, you may have feelings about hurricane Ian, or wildfires, or droughts – that affect people worldwide. When prophets discuss the weather, pay attention – it's personal and political. Joel says:

...be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before.

Rain and water are images of abundance, of well being. The spirit of God moves over the waters at the beginning of creation, Noah's flood, the waters that parted at the Exodus from Egypt, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by his cousin John, Jesus shares a drink of water with a woman at the well and then offers her the water of life. Our bodies are mostly made of water, water is life! Joel says:

*The early rain is for your **vindication**...God will repay/redeem the years that were lost to famine...my people shall never again be put to **shame**...*

I've been thinking this week about why the language of shame runs through this prophecy. Shame can be a paralyzing emotion, stopping us from creative thinking, curiosity, flourishing and thriving; shame pushes us down and turns our gaze inward and backwards with regret, remorse.

Psychologists talk about personal and systemic stressors that lead to shaming. Personal stressors are painful events that occur across a timeline in an individual's life, creating upheaval such as a house fire, the loss of a job, a life-threatening diagnosis, the death of a loved one. These stressors may affect the whole life, after they occur for an individual.

Systemic stressors describe enduring conditions such as chronic illness, family violence, lack of education and healthcare, poverty, sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression and deprivation. These are contextual stressors, which affect large groups of individuals even if they are not top of mind. The peeling lead paint in the home of a toddler, for example. A major threat to wellbeing that goes unnoticed while life carries on. They affect more than one person.

Where shame comes into it, though, is in the ways in which victims of either kind of stressors blame themselves for colluding with their own oppression. The victim may blame herself; the sufferer may have gotten in over his head.

Earlier this year the New York Times published a piece on the increasing problem of Climate Anxiety¹ – people who suffer with guilt and shame about their way of life's contribution to the climate crisis. Climate anxiety can be paralyzing – and people often feel it both personally and systemically. In my first church back in 1988 a member confessed to me how guilty she felt about all of those disposable diapers she had used when her children were little. She was a busy working mother, making the most economical choice, but she felt such remorse for what she had put in the landfill. She said she pictured them in one giant pile in her front yard, never going anywhere. A testimony against her. A problem for the planet. She thought about it every day.

...leaders in mental health maintain that anxiety over climate change is no different, clinically, from anxiety caused by other societal threats, like terrorism or

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/06/health/climate-anxiety-therapy.html>

*school shootings. Some climate activists, meanwhile, are leery of viewing anxiety over climate as dysfunctional thinking — to be soothed or, worse, cured.*²

We need to find a way to acknowledge what is wrong personally and systemically, acknowledge it honestly, and rather than turning inward with regret and shame, move outwards towards healing, renewal, new life.

Jesus did this with his own life. He accepted his world for what it was, as it was, and that took him to his cross. He took the betrayal of his friends, the tyranny of Rome, the uneasiness of the occupying army against a charismatic brown skinned young man from an obscure province – when people wondered if he would be Messiah. Rome’s undisputed authority was Caesar, not Jesus.

And many of the people who witnessed his suffering were shaken to their core. Judas could not live with his own role in it. Could not stand the shame. It took generations for the **word** to finally come forward, out of that trauma, that Jesus’ generous offering of his life was for the world, and that no matter what has gone wrong, it cannot be compared with what is about to go right.

All flesh will receive the spirit, according to Joel, especially the powerless – the young, the very old, and the slaves – male and female.

What if we believed – as Christians – that the climate crisis could be redeemed? Can God do that? What does forgiveness look like when we make amends for the environment as well as people we have wronged? Does it look like addressing pollution, going out and retrieving the plastic floating in the oceans? Changing our ways and inviting others to change – not blaming them? If we use the language of faith and forgiveness, how are we freed by that to change our ways and to have confidence in our redemption rather than our destruction? Not just our own, but the redemption of the world.

When Joel says:

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. ...my people shall never again be put to shame.

God’s blessing is raining down for our vindication. Shame does not need to control us; God has forgiven us, freed us from shame. It may still be burning in Oregon, the climate crisis may not be resolved, many of us seek to cope with systemic and personal wrongs; but at the same time we have enough. There have been lean years, there have been years of abundance, but in God’s mercy it is being redeemed. It is all being redeemed; like rain coming down. You have enough in God’s love, there is enough. Beginning now.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/06/health/climate-anxiety-therapy.html>

questions for discussion and reflection:

- What have you learned about having enough, from the experience of having too much or too little?
- If you have enough, when did you recognize it? How did you know?

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