

JUDGMENT, WARNING AND PROMISE

EPUC Minister Emeritus: Rev. Harold Wells November 21, 2021

Joel 2: 21-27; Matthew 6: 25-33.

Folks, we're living in fearful times. The virus has been picking up again. It doesn't seem to go away. And the huge disaster in British Columbia gives us a frightening glimpse of what lies ahead in climate change. It's not a cheery picture.

In our lectionary text from the Hebrew scriptures this week, the prophet Joel was addressing the people of in his time, which was also one of crisis and great suffering.

It was at a time, probably about 400 years before Christ, when the Hebrew people experienced a great natural disaster. An extraordinary plague of swarming locusts had attacked the crops, bringing hunger and great hardship upon the people. There must have been widespread malnutrition, even starvation.

One thing about the Bible: it doesn't cover up how very bad things can get. It sounds as though there must have been drought along with the swarming insects.

And no reliable pensions available, no CERB grants, no social assistance cheques!

Joel cries out: "Be dismayed you farmers, wail, you vinedressers, over the wheat and the barley; for the crops of the field are ruined, the vine withers, the fig tree droops, pomegranate, palm and apple – all the trees of the field are dried up; surely joy withers away among the people.... How the animals groan, the herds of cattle wander about, because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep are dazed...."

The locusts are like an invading army, says Joel, "its teeth are lions teeth, with the fangs of a lioness."

The prophet proclaims that this destruction is the judgment of the Almighty God to punish the people for their sins.

If we read on into chapter 3, we discover just what sins were making the prophet so angry. He speaks of drunkenness, but also of selling people into slavery, of "selling boys for prostitutes," and "selling girls for wine." It sounds like a very nasty sort of human smuggling was going on at that time. This was human cruelty and greed at its worst.

This is typical of the biblical prophets. Sometimes the prophets got into deep trouble, because they named, explicitly, and denounced, exactly what evils were going on in the world around them. That didn't make them popular.

Joel calls the people to weep and lament, to repent in sackcloth. Perhaps God will repent of his anger and return the people to joy and prosperity.

I suppose we, so many centuries later, can identify with these folk of ancient times. Aren't we too a people in crisis? Aren't we invaded by a vicious army of virus, with teeth like a lioness, striking down thousands of people, not only in one country, but all over the world?

Aren't we also, at the same time, plagued by changes in the climate, manifested in unprecedented forest fires, widespread drought, flooding, excessive heat, violent weather.....?

We've been getting a glimpse of what climate change means in the floods in British Columbia this week. The meteorologists describe a great "atmospheric river" which has descended upon our west coast – and this follows upon the drastic forest fires and excessive heat endured by these same people, all summer long!

One problem exacerbates another. The climate problem carries with it huge economic problems, including the loss of great numbers of cattle and poultry, the disruption of transportation lines for food, and broken water, energy and electricity systems.

It means terrible human suffering and sorrow. On the news we saw someone's whole house floating down the river.

In some ways we, as modern people, people of science, are better equipped to cope with this kind of natural catastrophe. We have vaccines, and hospitals, and insurance companies, and government social safety nets to help us. That is, as long as these continue to function amid such widespread disruption.

Where climate disaster is concerned, we here in southern Ontario seem to be in a kind of sweet spot, not as sorely afflicted as others in other parts of the world, and even in our own country. But we will not be spared forever.

Now most of us today do not consider that such disasters fall upon us as an act of God. Most Christians in our time do not think that God is intentionally sending these calamities upon us.

According to the New Testament, Jesus has plenty to say about God's judgment, but he does not speak this way about natural disasters, or sickness, or disability. He does not echo the prophets, who speak of such disasters as sent by God.

Besides that, we, in our time, do not need supernatural or religious explanations to account for viruses, or weather disasters. We have adequate scientific explanations. Nor do we see such disasters as the consequence of our moral failures.

It is true, though, that there is a sense in which some bad circumstances can be seen as a result of human evil and foolishness.

We know – and almost no one now denies it – that climate change is a result of human activity, especially our burning of fossil fuels – coal, oil, natural gas, and their emissions of carbon dioxide and methane.

We've known that for a long time now. The scientists have been warning us about this for more than thirty years.

The leadership of the churches have also been warning us about it for a very long time.

Our United Church of Canada, through its General Council, put out warnings about climate change as long ago as 1992, and made appeals to the people and to the government again in 2000 and in 2015. And the World Council of Churches also, and even the pope, have spoken out about climate change disasters threatening the world.

All these appeals have been more or less ignored by most people. We just didn't want to know.

We've also known for a long time what to do about it, in terms of an energy shift away from fossil fuels to renewable energy, but humanity as a whole, including us here in Canada, have stubbornly refused to make the changes that need to be made.

At the Glasgow conference, his past couple of weeks, humanity as a whole is still refusing to adopt the radical measures that are now required. Our Canadian government talks a good line about cutting carbon emissions, but continues to subsidize the oil and gas industries.

We can call this systemic sin. It's not simply my fault, or yours, it's our flawed political and economic system, in which we are all implicated. There simply hasn't been the public support for substantial action on climate.

3But we also know that some powerful individuals, especially in the fossil fuel industries, have done their best to cover up the facts and mislead the public, in the interest of their own profits.

It was the pursuit of profits for some, and for the rest of us, the comfort of the status quo has made us complacent, and reluctant to do what needs to be done.

So, yes, there is an element of human sinfulness inherent in the climate situation. Climate disasters are, in large measure, the consequence of human foolishness and greed. And we could see this as a kind of "judgment" falling upon us.

Of course, we know that not all disasters are human caused. The diseases and disabilities that afflict us are not all human-made. Surely the plague of locusts in ancient Palestine, was not human caused. But this doesn't mean that they've been sent by God.

Most of us have long since given up thinking of God as the micro-manager of the realm of nature. God is not making everything happen. Nor do we equate God and nature. A storm that destroys your house is not an 'act of God' – as the insurance companies like to say.

We praise and thank God, as Creator, for the wonders and fruitfulness of the natural world, but we do not consider that everything that happens in the physical world is God's will and intention.

No, God's world operates with a certain autonomy, according to its own laws. The world is not a chaos, though it may seem that way to us sometimes. Without such dependable laws, without natural predictability, we humans would be unable to act in the world in any intelligent way.

Why the world has been created just as it is, is finally a mystery to us. God did not ask anyone's advice at the time of the Big Bang, or when the planet Earth took shape at exactly the right distance from the sun.

We cannot pretend to understand the mind of the Creator, or what limitations God may have had in the act of creating. It's beyond us.

One thing, though, that we do need to understand is that we human beings are not the be-all and end-all of this universe.

We are an infinitesimal part of God's immense creation. Even on this planet Earth, we are a tiny presence amidst the vast depth of the oceans, the magnificent mountains, plains and forests.

And we are one species – yes a very special species – but nevertheless, one species among millions of species.

We like to imagine that the universe, and this planet, is all about us. As though we humans are the centre and purpose of everything. We are wont to be 'anthropocentric' – that's a fancy word for human-centered. We tend to think it all revolves around us.

But notice that in this text from Joel, the prophet bemoans the fate of the animals, as well as the people. He does not blame the animals of course, but he does commiserate with them.

In our text from Joel this morning, he follows his lament and warnings with words of assurance, both to people, and to animals.

Having called for repentance, he then comforts the people, proclaiming that God will not be angry forever, and eventually life will return to normal: “I will repay you,” says the Lord, “for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, my great army which I sent against you.”

Remarkable, isn't it, that he even addresses the soil, the land itself: “Do not fear, O soil, be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done marvellous things.”

He's addressing “the soil.” Only a poet or prophet would speak in this way. It's interesting that he perceives that the land itself is a living organism, which marvellously nourishes life-giving crops, and fruit trees, and animals, and pasture land. And the land too is ravaged and suffering.

Joel also addresses the animals, who have also been suffering: “Do not fear, you animals of the field... you shall eat plenty and be satisfied.”

The prophet is telling us that God cares about the soil, and the animals, and indeed the whole creation. The animals have their own value in and of themselves; they're not here merely for us. They have their own right to exist.

And of course we know it's true today, that non-human creatures are suffering – especially the wild animals, and the birds, the bees, the ants, the insects, and the corals, and the fish – indeed thousands of species have gone extinct, through human over-hunting or over-fishing, or simply human pollution and destruction of their habitats.

Today, if Joel were around, he'd tell us to repent, to change direction.

As consumers, as investors, and as citizens, as voters, as letter writers or petition signers, as potential activists or demonstrators, as people who simply speak to people around us, we all have to participate in creating a new awareness, a new consciousness, about what we have to do together.

Now, if we turn to our gospel text this morning from Matthew 6, we find a more comforting and consoling message. The voice of Jesus is very different from that of the prophet.

Jesus is telling us not to worry so much. He says:

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear... Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns, but your heavenly Father feeds them.... Or why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these....”

I must say I've always found this a rather difficult text. It made me wonder whether Jesus was totally unrealistic, out of touch with reality. Sorry, Jesus, but we are not birds or lilies, we are people, and we have to work and struggle to survive.

How can we not worry about the virus, or climate disasters? How can we not worry about unemployment, or possible hunger or disease? How can we not worry about our vulnerable loved ones?

“Do not worry about tomorrow,” he says. Oh come now, Jesus! Did you actually live in this world?

Should we not have pensions for our old age, savings accounts and investments? Should we not be judicious about the future?

I'm reminded of some lovely church people I knew many years ago, good kind, devout Christian people, who said to me:

“You have to look after yourself, Harold. If you don’t look after yourself, no one else will.” They were right. Did Jesus not know this?

Well, in fact, we know that Jesus was not naive about this world. His parables and sayings and deeds often make it clear that Jesus was actually a shrewd observer of the harsh realities of life.

There is another text (see Luke 14:28f.) where he instructs his disciples to “weigh the cost,” and prepare ahead of time for unexpected circumstances. Sometimes he warned his disciples about hard times to come.

One thing we know about Jesus is that he spoke dramatically. He wasn’t an academic, a kind of professor who carefully weighed his every word. No, he spoke poignantly, sometimes exaggerating to make a point. This text surely exaggerates.

But it has wisdom for us nevertheless.

Surely he’s right that we can’t be constantly wringing our hands worrying about what’s going to happen tomorrow. Yes, make a plan, prepare for the future, but also live in the present. Be thankful and enjoy what you have here and now.

Especially don’t fuss about belongings and possessions. There’s a message here for us about clothing. Why be obsessed with looking good?

Why be preoccupied with houses and cars? A lot of that is also about looking good. Learn to relish the simple things of life. “Consider the lilies of the field. Solomon [that most ostentatious of kings] ... Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

I don’t want to de-radicalize the words of Jesus. He’s calling us to much more than mere conventional respectability. The key point in this text comes at the end. “Seek first the Kingdom of God.”

Here are six words that could warrant three whole sermons.

He tells us: If you’re going to be obsessed about anything, be obsessed with the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God, which begins now, and continues on into God’s eternity:

As Rev. Barbara says: it’s the kin-dom: where we try to regard everyone as our kin, to treat everyone as our relatives, our family.

It’s what we pray for at least once a week: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” The Kingdom is where God’s will is done. It’s the Reign of Justice, Peace and Love.

In the here and now, in this world as know it, the Kingdom of God is about justice – about fairness, dealing fairly with others, and standing up for victims of injustice. And that includes now eco-justice. Be fair to the planet, to the land, to the waters, to the animals.

And the Kingdom of God is about peace: living in harmony as much as possible, forgiving one another, de-escalating conflict, whether on the broad stage of world affairs, or in one’s neighbourhood and personal or family life. And be at peace with the realm of nature.

The Kingdom of God is especially about love – nourishing relationships of care and compassion, and of joy in one another.

Yes, we have to be practical and look after ourselves, be judicious in our plans for the future. But in all of this, seek first the Kingdom of God.

And, yes, we can avoid excessive worry about the future, by practicing our own serenity, by cultivating our own inner peace. We can nurture that by prayer. Keeping in mind that, whatever happens, we are finally in the hands of the Eternal One who loves the world, who loves all creation, and loves each of us.

Thanks be to God! Amen.