

Palisades Presbyterian Church
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Sermon Notes

The Trouble with Portents
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Anyone who has ever been through any kind of suffering knows what it is like to hope for the end of that suffering to come. We wait - with time - for aches to go away, for a cold or flu to pass, or for the pain associated with the loss of a loved one to drift into...less pain, more celebration of a life in which we shared.

This has always been the way. Since late last summer we have been reading about the suffering and trials and hope of the Hebrews, primarily through the eyes of Jeremiah, the prophet.

Remember his prophetic style and declarations? He called-out arrogance and denial of the primacy of God as short cuts to disaster. He challenged the weak faith of kings as invitations to being overrun by enemies. And, ultimately, he saw his nation in captivity as a family, God's family, chastened, frightened, disenfranchised from all they had once known as a powerful and mighty nation – now captives.

Jeremiah exhorted them to prepare to re-emerge, in waiting to raise families, build homes, and become part of the community – to thrive – so that when the time came they would be strong and in many numbers, ready to return to their homeland. Such were the things God had promised them. Finally, there would come a time when God would forgive their sins and unite with them.

From the perspective of Jeremiah, from the perspective of the Hebrews – success or disaster were indications of the pleasure or wrath of God with regard to God's people. It was always like that.

Yet, when Jeremiah announced that he was speaking for God that God was pleased or angry – how did he really know that? When he prophesied and promised – was he filled literally with God's words – or was he somehow alive with them, that they came through his physical, emotional, spiritual being – but they were really not of him—but came to him in some other way – sort of like a Divine Intuition?

Joel, the prophet of today's reading gives us some insight into the process of "the revelations of God," at least for him. According to scholars on the topic, the writings of Joel demonstrate a balance between the outward and inward

elements of religion. God not only reveals Godself in the powerful and moral control of nature and history, but also through God's spirit within.

Considering this, "God's speaking" to a prophet might be the voice that emerges when a prophet sees "an angry nature or advancing army" as the symptom of a deeper hurt the prophet knows inside, watching people do the things we do. The prophecy may be a heightened awareness of the juxtaposition of events and faith that produces a response toward "stopping the hurt, the pain, the suffering, or the effects of the advancing army."

And so more on Joel...

The timing for his writings vary from pre-exilic to post-exilic, that is from well-before the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple – to well after the Jews were given their freedom by King Cyrus of Babylon and they returned to their land.

In the first chapter, Joel describes the horror of a locust invasion, a terrible devastating swarm of locusts that destroyed all the crops and humbled the great and the not-so-great.

1:4

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.

A bit later in verse 10:

The fields are laid waste, the ground mourns

God's wrath was upon the nation.

Historically, there is no extant record of such an infestation That doesn't mean that it didn't happen. However, some believe that Joel was, in fact, writing, about the Babylonian or some other invasion by foreign armies. In the Greek Codex the word locust is used also to refer to Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Greeks.

Who knows? With a debated time frame for this work of over 600 years, it's hard to tell what historical period his writings might refer to. But like Jeremiah, there is good reason to believe that Joel is also addressing national, political, and international concerns.

Their world was mired in one upheaval, advancing army, and controlling government after the other. Daily life was always in – or about to be in – some

form of a contest. So prophecies would naturally be about the times and the day-to-day lives.

How different is it today, when some of our leaders predict (some more prophetically than others) the coming or going of Social Security in the next twenty years, the effects of global warming, or the threat of nuclear power in the hands of some considered to be enemies of the U.S. or U.S. allies.

The difference for us, here this morning, is that most of us don't see these threats or the possibility of their outcomes as predictions of prophets or the wrath of God. Some do, absolutely, but for the most part – we are a world that sees politics first and theology in some distant place.

However in the time of Joel, the statement of prophecy had such influence at some levels that it was more a part of daily life. The two: prophecy and politics blurred, as well. For example: The coming of the Lord did not always refer to YHWH or Jesus. It was a common notion of the times that the coming of the Lord had to do with armies and occupations: This quote from Biblical Training, an online resource:

“...in the ancient world there was a very widespread popular notion. This notion was that a truly great king, when he went to battle, could win his war in a day. If King X got into a war with King Y, King X, if he were truly a great sovereign, would demolish King Y in a day. There are really many, many references to this--the idea that in one day you can overcome the enemy.”¹ (Biblical Training)

After the battle, if you were on the conquered side – in came the new Lord. So the transference of the coming of the Lord (a King) to the coming of the LORD YHWH (YHWH-the Hebrew King) would be a natural reference for the time when all oppressors would be overcome by King YHWH and the Coming of the Hebrew LORD.

And when that happens says a paraphrased Joel:

“the rain will fall and the crops will grow, your suffering will be vindicated, the vats will overflow with wine and oil. You will eat plenty, and you will be satisfied. You will never be ashamed again. Your children will receive the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit will be everywhere, the old will dream dreams and the young will see visions of what the world can be – and it will be done!”

And, everyone will know that you have the mightiest of Lords. They will know it by the signs they will see: the darkening of the sky, the upheavals

¹ <http://www.biblicaltraining.org/bible-gateway-online/bible-Old-Testament-Survey/bible-Joel-Obadiah.html>

in the earth, announcing the great (for you) and terrible (for others) day of the Lord.

Suffering, oppression, tortuous conditions – all who suffer seek signs for some reason to continue on and not give up – and prophets are some of the best at doing that, even if that means interpreting or co-opting eclipses and volcanoes, earthquakes and other natural occurrences as a sign of “your Lord.”

So what of predictions and portents? Do we dismiss them all? Do we just pooh-pooh them and lump them all into one place as explainable or inaccurate? In a time of continued resurgence of the French “prophet” Michael Nostradamus’ work The Centuries, written in the 16th Century or more modern exposés that predict the magnetic pole shift of the earth in our lifetimes with cataclysmic consequences – it is not all that unrespectable to explain the unexplainable as a sign of God with a collateral return to a near literal translation of biblical doom, scurrying to get on the right side of judgment – or just scurrying in fear with no particular destination.

All this is heightened, I think, by our intense practice of trying to read the future, predicting the outcome of everything from sports to the quantum unfolding of the future universe. We seem to converse this foretelling with an innate desire to attempt to balance everything, to have answers, to know. To know.

And, for some, this becomes an obsession – an obsession that confuses it all with a need to control and manipulate the outcome of things to match one’s own vision of what should or will be.

Some friends of mine call that EGO, with capital letters – which stands for “Easing God Out.” Take charge, take control, make it happen. That kind of EGO is not the answer, I think.

Rather, I think the path is to find ways to integrate – consciously and otherwise – the presence of God in all things, without taking charge.

Some would argue and say that God is in everything, every leaf, every branch, every nuance of creation and more – even every manipulation! So, whatever I do – even if I call it “me” that is doing it: it’s still God.

Well, that’s a bit of a stretch, and maybe a bit dangerous. It’s a way of steamrolling through life and claiming that whatever you do – it’s right, acceptable, and God-driven. That sounds a bit more like becoming God than being led by God.

What I do think is true is that God is in everything since everything is of God, but that it is the active and conscious awareness of the presence of God that brings all together in ways that fulfill our purpose and harmony with nature in life and

creation, as we know it, regardless of when it might have begun or might actually end.

In Luke's Reading this morning, it starts out with these words:

"Jesus also told a parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."

Contempt: a lack of respect accompanied by a feeling of intense dislike..." A strong word directed at the Pharisees and most likely a redaction on the part of Luke – especially considering the times during which this gospel would have been written. Still, "contempt," arrogance, hubris, and righteousness – being justified somehow in your contempt could easily apply to any group using their predictions or power to oppress.

The idea of prediction and "knowing what is best for others" very often go hand in hand. Have you every noticed that? Some of us tell people (or are told ourselves) all the time what is best for us and what will happen if we don't do the right thing. In it's simplest of forms it can be off-putting. In it's strongest of ways, it is – captivity.

I do it, too, sometimes and sometimes with conviction and experience. Yet that doesn't mean that I can be sure what will actually transpire. At best, I can offer my experience and hope and the rest is in God's hands.

And therein for me lies the conclusion in the parable this morning and the connection with the idea of "portents and prophecies sometimes being troubling."

It's not about the swipe at the Pharisees the last line, verse 14: "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The trouble, sometimes, with prophets, prophecy, portents, and predictions is that they become more about the design of the individual than about the way a Spirit may be moving the individual to respond. Without humility it will almost always be about the individual.

Any prophecy or prediction or sought after right way of living in the deepest of senses must hinge on humility, and for those spiritually inclined the humility is part of seeking God's will and knowing that we live in the abundance of God – but that we are not God.

There seems to be a dearth of prophets like the ones of old in our post-modern world. Now and then, though, now and then one with a keen insight and a cutting edge to freedom and justice emerges: the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. comes

to mind. But even for him, it was never about Martin – it was always about God's call to him.

It's interesting, isn't it, that we frequently refer to God's "call" to us, that "something" we know deeply that "tells" us what it is we are supposed to do – most often beyond any efforts to quantify the reasoning for doing it. Maybe, maybe, that's the same thing Jeremiah and Joel and Jesus knew in some more intense way. And, it may just be that together as community in the work and worship of this congregation and others – we each have a piece of that greater voice and call of God, as we know God, that we can take to others in all ways that we live in this world. Maybe today's prophets are in fact a chorus in which every voice counts and needs to be cherished.

The trouble with portents and prophecies is that they quiet those voices and subjugate us to something outside of the inner knowing and presence of God. Whether in the midst of turmoil or joy, it is always about how we know God and how that moves us – not an ancient historian's ideas of what will happen in the future a modern documentary's claims about the apocalypse.

And even Jesus told us that we know not the time or the place of the end but that it is the practice of the greatest of the commandments that matters most.

In all things and all ways may you know the God within you and the abiding peace that exceed all understanding – portents and prophecies included.

Amen.