

Last week our theme was love of the earth, and how we know there is love for us in the earth. This week our theme is love of our community. Both of those come together nicely in the reading from Joel, because he's writing in the context of a natural disaster that has devastated the environment and the human community, and he's relaying the word of God that people need to hear in that moment.

The book of Joel seems to be deliberately ahistorical. He has no interest in telling us who's king or what else is going on politically. All we know, from chapter 1, is that there's been a devastating plague and the crops are gone, animals are starving, and the people are in anguish. Joel neither says nor implies that this is a judgment for something that Israel has done. It's just a thing that happened.

Having set the stage with a description of the ravaged land and people, Joel then calls the people to worship. We've all heard these words before—they're traditionally read during Lent—but I had never thought about what it means that they're being called to *Hebrew* worship during a *plague*. Hebrew worship always involves bringing a gift to God—some kind of sacrifice. But there's a plague on. This time they have nothing to bring, nothing to sacrifice, and yet God is calling them to come. "Yet even now, . . . return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing." God wants them to come empty-handed. How do you even do that?

*And*, Joel says, God is gracious and merciful: "Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God?" Joel thinks that God may supply the sacrifice himself, knowing that the people have nothing to sacrifice. Such is the gravity of the occasion that everyone is summoned to this

worship, even the people who wouldn't normally be expected to participate—newlyweds and children and infants. Everyone is to come, fit and unfit, and bring nothing but themselves.

There is invitation in this call to come with broken hearts. It's an invitation to come without having tidied yourself up, without a plan for how you're going to get things put back together again. Coming with a broken heart to worship God, having no offering to make, suggests that we come with lots of feelings and no ready answers. It is both an invitation to self-reflection—how did I get to this place?—and a promise that God is waiting in mercy.

There is some virtue, or some utility, to maintaining a stiff upper lip. My mother-in-law is an expert stiff upper lipper, having grown up in England during the Second World War and lost her father to the war. She became a flight attendant and later an executive with TWA, and she has awesome executive chops. In her view, there is nothing that cannot be managed, and one's starting place is always the conviction that everything is already **just fine**. That philosophy has served her well over the years, and there is nobody I'd rather be on a choppy flight over the Atlantic with than her. *However*, the stiff upper lip can become an obstacle, a problem in itself. Because everything is already just fine, there's no need to ask for help, ever. There's no reason to seek more than the most cursory medical opinion for the trifling ailments that now and then afflict people in their 80s and 90s. There is no need to inquire into or account for potentially troubling lapses of memory, or mysterious falls. Everything is lovely, thanks very much, let's talk about *you*.

Joel is telling us that God is 100% aware when everything is not fine or lovely, and God would very much like us to show up as the hot mess we are. Joel's focus is not on social justice, as it is with some prophets, nor on correct worship, as it is with other prophets. Joel's focus is

on right relationship with God, and the only way to be in right relationship is to be honest. It means bringing not only the good, but the painful moments, to light. How have I been coping with this plague? Have I been as assertive as I should have been? As generous? As rigorous in my role as a citizen? How do I feel about it, and can I bring that consciously with me to worship God? Much of what we have spent so many years calling weakness—emotional depth, caring, compassion, transparency—all of those things are held up by the prophet as part of what makes right relationship. We need to show up *without* answers so as to be ready to receive from God what we hadn't thought of asking for.

Because that's what God promises at the end of chapter 2. Not only will God send grain, wine, and oil, but God is also bringing about an outpouring of Spirit such that our vision will clear and there will be visions and prophecies from the least likely among us. "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." Who saw that coming, during the plague? Who even thought to ask for that? Only when we divest ourselves of the obvious answers and the obvious plans—only when we unstiffen our lips and let go of the steering wheel—can we receive what God has to offer. It's like that old Zen story of the student who went to learn from a great master. The master offered him tea, and then poured it into the student's cup until it overflowed. "What are you doing?" cried the student, probably mopping hot tea off his lap. "This is what it's like to teach you," said the master. "Your head is already so full that there is no room for you to hear what I have to teach."

Last Monday, Nov. 30, was the birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion.

Guru Nanak is unlikely to have been familiar with the prophet Joel, but he taught that the goal of life was to find and experience deep connection with God. What does that look like?

Speaking for God, he said, “If you want to play the game of love, then approach me with your head in your hands.” Approach me with your head in your hands. Come without pretense.

And Guru Nanak also knew how surprising God is, and how necessary it is to be ready to welcome the unexpected. When he was still a boy, his father gave him money to go to town and find “a good deal.” On his way to town, Guru Nanak walked by a group of impoverished wanderers and gave all his money to them. Then, like Jack and the Beanstalk, he had to go home and explain himself to his father. He pointed out that his father had asked him to find a good deal and asked, “What could have been a better deal than this?”

It makes sense to prepare for Christmas—the birth of our savior, unexpectedly small, nonverbal, and helpless—by embracing transparency and depth in our relationship with God as individuals and as a community. Then when we’re surprised by God, we can pick up the surprise and bring it home. Let us pray a prayer by Walter Brueggemann:

In our secret yearnings  
we wait for your coming,  
and in our grinding despair  
we doubt that you will.  
And in this privileged place  
we are surrounded by witnesses who yearn  
more than do we  
and by those who despair more deeply than  
do we.  
Look upon your church and its pastors  
in this season of hope  
which runs so quickly to fatigue

and in this season of yearning  
which becomes so easily quarrelsome.  
Give us the grace and the impatience  
to wait for your coming to the bottom of our  
toes,  
to the edges of our fingertips.  
We do not want our several worlds to end.  
Come in your power  
and come in your weakness  
in any case  
and make all things new.  
Amen.