

We don't know for sure when the book of Joel was written, but we can tell that it was addressed to a traumatized population. Joel refers to an invading army at one point, and at another point, to a plague of locusts. This call back to God and the promise of the outpouring of God's spirit is a word to devastated people. Prophecy, dreams and visions seem hardly possible to people who are now barely putting one foot in front of the other. But vision is vital. I would argue that without vision, nobody recovers from the locusts.

The website Trendhunter.com surveys new products and patterns of buying to get insights into consumer behavior so that companies can market more of the hottest products. It has a whole section on survivalist culture, citing products like prefab disaster housing, survivalist food supplements, and extreme survival kits. I also saw a do-it-yourself surgery kit, but that turned out to be laparoscopic bypass equipment, which I don't think is survivalist as much as it is very very thrifty. The survivalist products all reflect a dystopic vision of a post-Armageddon (or post-locust) society in which it's everyone for themselves, the neighbor is a threat to your security, and life is nasty, brutish and short. This is a dreadful vision, more a nightmare than a dream, and this is why Joel hears God urging the people to come back with their whole hearts and promises life-giving vision.

"Return to me with your whole heart," says God, evoking the behaviors associated with a death: fasting, weeping, tearing one's clothes. This is not a call to repentance, like the *metanoia* of the New Testament, but an opening to God. Perhaps hardship had made the people's hearts hard, and they had done things they were ashamed of. God is inviting them to come home *with* their damaged souls, not

to stay far away until they've fixed themselves up. "Return to the Lord your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." What could possibly keep a person away from such an invitation? Only misplaced pride, perhaps, a refusal to admit to the need to be fixed up. But limping along on our own, we delay the healing that *everyone* needs.

A recent article in the *New York Review of Books* by Masha Gessen talks about the choices made by people with vision and without vision, although that's not the language she uses. Her great-grandfather, who might be seen as "practical" rather than visionary, was part of the *Judenrat* or council of Jewish elders set up by the Nazis in the Jewish ghettos. Part of their duty was to organize the orderly deportation of Jews to the death camps, a deeply demoralizing and traumatic participation in their own oppression. Her great-grandfather was primarily responsible for ensuring that the ghetto was supplied with food.

He ran the trucks that brought food in and took garbage out, he ran the canteen and supervised the community gardens that a group of young socialists planted. **He also discouraged the young socialists from trying to organize a resistance movement:** it would be of no use and would only jeopardize the ghetto's inhabitants. It took him almost two years to change his mind about the resistance efforts, as he slowly lost hope that the *Judenrat*, by generally following the rules and keeping the ghetto inhabitants in line, would be able to save at least some of them.

<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/11/27/trump-realism-vs-moral-politics-choice-we-face/>

Masha Gessen herself was faced with a vision/no vision choice of lesser import in 2012 when she was working as an editor of a popular science magazine called *Volkrug Sveta*. "Vladimir Putin, who fancies himself an explorer and a nature conservationist, took a liking to the publication. His administration launched a kind

of friendly takeover of the magazine, one that the publisher could not refuse.” She found herself publishing stories she believed were bogus, and felt a slow rot setting in at the magazine.

Then I was asked to send a reporter to accompany Putin on his hang-gliding adventure with a migrating flock of endangered Siberian cranes. I refused—not on principle but because I was afraid that the reporter would see and describe something that would get the magazine in trouble. The publisher fired me, but then Putin called me in for a meeting and offered me my job back—legally, it wasn’t his to offer, but for practical purposes it was.

In comparison to the Putin regime’s major abuses of power and suppression of the opposition, the story of the cranes and my firing does not deserve a mention. All that happened as a result of the hang-gliding trip (from what I know) was that two or three of the cranes were badly injured for the sake of the president’s publicity stunt, and I lost my job. **But I also lost a bit of my soul and the sense of moral agency I had earned over decades of acting like my best journalist self.** When Putin offered me my job back after the trip, I hesitated to say no: I loved that job, and I thought I could still edit a good magazine and keep some fine journalists employed. I didn’t want to imagine what would happen the next time I was asked to cover a Putin photo op or a fake story produced by his Geographic Society, which siphoned money off like every other part his mafia state. Fortunately for me, my closest friend said, “Have you lost your mind?” by which she meant my sense of right and wrong.

Masha Gessen argues that people surrender their vision and their principles because half a loaf is better than none, because somebody’s going to do that job, because they think that they will maintain some leverage in the system. She believes that such reasoning is futile and that you cannot predict the other party’s responses with any useful certainty. Speaking of economic sanctions against Russia, she says, “we cannot know whether economic punishment of the Russian government has been, in the realist sense of the word, ‘effective.’ What we do know is that sanctions were the correct response from a moral standpoint . . . simply because it is right to refuse to do business with a dictator and his cronies.”

Joel speaks God's word to a people who have been through a terrible time and are not yet restored. The temptation must have been great to hoard food or fuel when it was available, and not to share with others in need. At the same time, they were probably ashamed and ambivalent about their betrayals of their neighbors. God's word to them in this situation has two parts. First, invitation: Come home. Come as you are, not as you should be. Don't be afraid to look at yourself; I see all the flaws and I still think you look terrific. And this is a wonderful Advent message, because we're starting a new church year in the darkness of winter, and way in the distance there's a glimmer of starlight which is saying to us, "Come closer! This light is for you! Come home!"

The second part of God's word in Joel is a promise: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. Every gender and every generation will have a part in this new vision, and it will extend beyond the heirs of the household even to the most marginal members, the male and female slaves. This is not notification for us to wait passively to watch a miracle occur; it is encouragement to *be* the change in the world we wish to see. Keep the dream alive by living it. Re-shape reality around us until change is accomplished. Do not compromise your soul by cooperating with the invaders, but live the promise of God.

There are some terrific stories about people who've done that. A few weeks ago there was a widely shared story about a woman who sent two lunches to school with her son for a whole year because one of his classmates had been going without lunch. I am pretty sure that woman is not a survivalist. She has a vision with which she reshapes reality. The book *Hidden Figures*, about African-American women who

played critical roles in the aeronautics industry during Jim Crow, tells about one of them who would come into the canteen at lunchtime every day and remove the “Colored Only” sign from the table. Didn’t matter how often it was replaced, every day she reshaped that reality. Finally they gave up replacing the sign.

The promise still holds for you and me. “If you then know how to give good gifts to your children”—and we do—“how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?” Let us pray.

Loving Lord,
When we have strayed, you have called us to come home to you. “Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.” With all our hearts we return to you, and gratefully accept your gentle love, for the sake of the one whose spirit lives in us, Jesus Christ our loving savior. Amen.