

Advent: Awaiting a Savior (Joel)

“In Those Days I Will Pour out My Spirit”

This morning is the last Sunday of Advent. Before this new week is out, we will celebrate again the arrival of Jesus Christ as the baby in Bethlehem’s manger. We will welcome the One who is the fulfillment of every promise, the answer to every question, the antidote to every fear, and the satisfaction of every longing.

But in the season leading up to Christmas, Advent, we remember that this same Jesus, who came as promised 2000 years ago, promised to come back. He may come again before the week is out, even before the day is out.

For several years during the four weeks of Advent, I have preached a book or section of the Old Testament intending to learn from God’s faithful ones in the past how to anticipate Christ’s coming.

This extended series arises from the conviction that the whole Old Testament points to Jesus Christ. It all looks forward to him. Drop down anywhere in the Old Testament and all the signs point to Jesus. The whole Bible unites around him. He is the book’s central character.

Jesus himself held this same strong conviction. So did his closest followers, the apostles. Consider these sample passages.

Rom 16:25–26 [Paul’s final blessing in his letter to the Romans], Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages²⁶ but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—

John 5:46–47 [Jesus speaking to Jewish leaders], For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me.⁴⁷ But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”

[Peter declaring in the temple after Christ’s death and resurrection], Acts 3:24 And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days.

Acts 26:22–23 [Paul before King Festus] To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass:²³ that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

This is the 28th message in this series and the book for it is Joel. I'll admit that this is a tough one. The connection between Joel and Christmas is not obvious. There seems to be no direct prediction about Jesus' first or second coming like we find, for example, in Micah 5 or Isaiah 9.

But I wandered into Joel trusting that, if Joel is among "all the prophets," then he is pointing to Christ somehow. I was not disappointed. Let's turn there and see how.

Joel begins on p. 760 of the Bible we make available to you in the rack under the seat in front of you. Joel is tucked between Hosea and Amos. Most of his book is poetry. When we encounter poetry in the Bible, we expect dense phrases and figurative language as we do in Joel. One commentator calls Joel powerful but perplexing, an apt description.

We know very little about the human prophet who writes this poetry. The first verse introduces him merely as "Joel, the son of Pethuel." We know nothing of Pethuel. We cannot know for certain when Joel lived or, specifically, where he preached. A good possibility is that he preached to Judah 700 years before Christ when Judah enjoyed an era of great prosperity but also spiritual decline.

Joel's three chapters describe three waves of God's judgment. Each new wave rises with greater intensity. One wave has already reached the shore in Ch. 1. God brought judgment on his people through a plague of locusts or grasshoppers (1:2-12). A summary of the attack appears in, Joel 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.

In this agricultural economy, these insects destroy all material blessings. There are no grapes to make wine; no olives to press for oil. There is no grain for food or offerings. 1:10 surveys the devastation.

The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes.

Joel calls this judgment the "day of the Lord" (1:15). God brings this natural disaster as a direct punishment for sin. Let me pause at that point for a caution. We cannot use Joel 1 to conclude that anyone who suffers in a natural disaster is being punished for his or her sin.

Joel had a specific revelation from God that this was the case with this locust invasion. We do not have any such word from God about, for example, the tornado in Kentucky last week. Be careful. We know that God is sovereign over the weather. He's in control. He's working out his purposes even when they exceed our understanding. He's working out many purposes all at the same time.

We know that God judges sin not just at the end of history but through it. But we cannot know what sins God has determined to punish now and how he carries out his judgment. Nor can we think that, if we have avoided some disaster or enjoyed great blessing, we are without sin.

This is why repentance is always in order as Joel calls for in 1:13-20. Recall when Jesus was asked a question about a natural disaster.

Luke 13:4–5 Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Apparently, in Joel’s day, people enjoyed their riches and ignored God who gave them. 1:16 suggests that they sought their joy in material blessings and not in God himself.

Consider our Christmas celebration. We love this season because we get gifts and enjoy lavish feasts. But what if God took it all away. Would we still have joy in him? What if there were no presents under the tree? What if there were no money to buy Christmas dinner? Would we still find joy in God and his goodness to us in Jesus Christ?

When Dr. Seuss’s Grinch stole Christmas, he acted out of envy of the Who’s down in Whoville. He merely wanted to take from them. God takes from us only because he wants us to have so much more: himself.

In chapter 2, a second judgment wave appears not far from shore. Another day of the Lord approaches. The locust plague was a warning of a more dire judgment to come.

This second judgment is an invading army that destroys everything in its path (2:1-11). Joel may be predicting the assaults of the Syrians or the Babylonians that God orchestrated to bring Israel and Judah to ruin.

Seeing this larger wave coming, Joel sounds the alarm (2:1) and again calls for repentance (2:12-17). In this call, Joel reminds us of God’s mercy. Note the beautiful poetry of Joel 2:12–13,

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

At the end of Ch. 2 and into Ch. 3, Joel looks farther out to the horizon. He sees yet another judgment wave coming, another day of the Lord. It is even larger still. This wave encompasses the whole earth. God calls the nations to engage in a war that he will win decisively. His march will be like a farmer cutting down crops (2:30- 3: 17). Yet the Lord will spare those who trust in him and give them eternal blessings (3:18-21).

I want you to notice that, between the second and third wave of judgment, Joel abruptly changes his tone. He predicts a time of great blessing for God's people. The Lord describes this blessing as a great harvest. Return to Joel 2:18–19

Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. ¹⁹ The LORD answered and said to his people, "Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.

Drop down to Joel 2:26–27

"You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. ²⁷ You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Then notice that after this time of abundance begins (when God is with his people who are not ashamed), God will do something amazing. Joel 2:28–29

"And it shall come to pass afterward [after the abundance begins to come in], that 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. ²⁹ Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

This might not catch our attention, except that, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection (the day we call Pentecost ["Pente"=fifty]), the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church. Peter announced that this pouring out of the Spirit fulfilled Joel's prophecy. You can read the account in Acts 2.

This is astounding. In between the invasion that sends Israel into exile and the final judgment of the nations, God is going to send an abundant harvest which includes the pouring out of his Spirit on all flesh.

And as we learn from the rest of the book of Acts, "all flesh" does not merely mean all kinds of Israelites but, people from all over the world. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 3:32, which Peter quotes in Acts 2:21)

Don't you find it interesting that, when Jesus comes the first time, he describes the time as a harvest?

Matthew 9:37–38 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

In John 4, after his initial conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well outside town, Jesus' disciples return from the village with food, urging him to eat.

John 4:32–36 But [Jesus] said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”³³ So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?”³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.³⁵ Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.³⁶ Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.”

Note how Jesus refers to himself.

John 15:5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

John 12:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit [he did die, and his death has been bearing fruit all over the world ever since. You in this room who are alive in Christ are part of that harvest].

I submit to you that Joel lays out a broad sketch of human history. He shows how God will first send his Son as the start of a great worldwide harvest and then send his Spirit on all whom he gathers to himself in faith before he brings final judgment on sin.

All this importantly connects to Christmas. After God’s OT people settled into exile, God went silent. Prophets disappeared. For nearly 500 years, there was no word from God.

But then, an angel appears to an elderly priest named Zechariah to announce that his son John, who would proclaim the coming of Jesus, would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the time he was in his mother’s womb.

John’s mother, Elizabeth, meets Mary the young girl who is carrying Jesus and is filled with the Holy Spirit and begins to speak of God fulfilling his promises. In response, Mary sings a song boldly proclaiming God’s faithfulness to his promises.

When John was born, his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and began to declare how God was bringing salvation through the promised King from David’s line.

After Jesus was born, his parents took him to the temple where the family met an older man named Simeon of whom it was said, “the Holy Spirit was upon him.” When he saw Jesus, he began to sing about God’s salvation to all the nations, not just Israel.

These are ordinary people. In the OT era, God sent his Spirit on prophets and kings, special people for special assignments. Now, he is sending his Spirit on common people, the young and the old. When God the Son makes his entrance into the world to initiate the great restoration promised by the prophets, God pours out his Holy Spirit as early rain. He is a foretaste of what is to come.

What does all this have to do with us? I close by pointing to some applications.

First, recognize where we are in history. The harvest has come with Christ. The Spirit has been poured out after Christ's exaltation. Paul reminds the Romans that all who belong to Christ have the Spirit. If you do belong to Christ, God has shown his faithfulness to you by sending laborers into his harvest to gather you in.

Who shared the gospel with you? Who told you about Christ? Whom did God use to lead you to personal faith in his Son? These were just ordinary people empowered by the Holy Spirit to testify to God's promises. During this Christmas season, take some of your time off and, if he or she is still alive, write or call and thank them for telling you about the Savior.

Second, notice that the common experience of those who have the Spirit is that they begin to talk about Jesus. Before the Spirit was poured out Jesus promised,

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

I'm deeply encouraged that Jesus did not say, "You must be my witnesses" but "You will be my witnesses." The Spirit will turn you into witnesses.

As we go to family reunions and holiday gatherings in these next weeks, let's see them as gospel opportunities. Let's view our presence there as the Lord's placing one of his witnesses in a strategic situation. Let's call on the Holy Spirit for the power to speak boldly about Christ.

We must speak truthfully. We must speak lovingly. We must speak beautifully. Go back and read Luke 1-2 and notice how often those who speak by the Holy Spirit speak poetry.

Such bold and beautiful witness is a weakness in my own life. I accept the rebuke I received from one of you recently for my lack of bold and beautiful witness. It's a battle for me to introduce Christ into a conversation. But by the Holy Spirit, I will win this battle.

Why don't we speak more about Jesus to others? Is it that we have so many other blessings to talk about that we ignore the one who is our greatest blessing? If so, recall the warning from Joel that God can take away what gets in the way of our delighting in him.

Why don't we speak more about Jesus to others? Is it that we are ashamed of him? Recall the promise of Joel 2:26 that God has fulfilled to us in Christ.

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

The Christmas story reminds us of ordinary people talking about Jesus because of the presence of the Holy Spirit who loves to draw attention to Christ. You'll hear more on this theme next week as Joe preaches from the book of Acts. May the initial Christmas story be our Christmas story this year. Pray that the Lord will send us as laborers into his harvest.

Third, if you see that God has brought abundant blessing in Christ; if you see that in Christ God has shown that he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love to those who have sinned against him, why not repent and turn back to the Lord?

Jesus Christ became a human being with a body so that, in death, he might be the seed that bears much fruit. In dying, he took the sinners' punishment. In dying he satisfied God's wrath against sin. In dying, Jesus drew to himself all who would turn away from their sin and trust in him for a harvest of eternal life.

There will be another future harvest. Joel 3:13 anticipates the day when Jesus will command, "Put in the sickle." A sickle is a sharp tool used to cut down grain. On that day, the harvest will be a harvest of judgment. The day of the Lord may wait but it cannot be stopped.

To which harvest will you belong? Even now Jesus is gathering a great harvest. He is pouring his Spirit like rain on all flesh. Today, before it is too late, come to him. Come to him who said,

"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."