

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
December 4, 2016

Joel 2:12-13; 23-24, 26-29

“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil. You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed. Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed. “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

### **Meditation**

Every year this time of year my brother and his wife take a week to go someplace sunny, someplace beachy which is fine. But every year they come back and with about a week left til Christmas my brother calls me – sort of desperate sounding – and asks: What do you want for Christmas?

I remember one December when the call came I was herding some unwieldy grocery bags into the car, and feeling put upon by being asked this question. “What do I want? I WANT PEACE!” I hollered into the phone.

Peace is hard to find when there is just so much to do and you find yourself snapping at people you love. Peace is hard to find when people around you seem tired and even touchy, touchy in your direction. Peace is hard to find when there’s pressure to do Holiday things and maybe your spirit isn’t in a holiday kind of place.

This week I prepared for bible study of the scripture from Joel. I don’t know a lot about Joel. The words about rending your hearts and not your clothing I recognize that as an invitation to Lent. And I know the last part, the dream part, is what got preached by Peter on the day of Pentecost, the day the Spirit came. But I didn’t know – I don’t think I ever learned – what the backdrop was of Joel, just what the crisis was that Joel was speaking of, or into.

It was locusts. We don’t know a lot about Joel’s time frame, just when in fact he was doing his prophet thing, but we do know it was in the midst of a rural crisis. The fields had been planted, the harvest was ready, and a tornado of locusts razed everything to the ground. It wasn’t just disappointing, and disgusting, it was devastating. People would be hungry, and many would starve.

Now maybe it is an indication of holiday stress, but I woke up one morning the morning after bible study giggling about the locusts. Not the situation in the bible, which was real, and sad. It was the idea of preaching about locusts. What do locusts have to do with our Advent preparations? What do locusts have to do with lighting a candle for peace?

I giggled myself up out of bed. And it came to me, like a flash: Joel was doing what faithful people have always done: He was trying to find a way. He was trying to find words, and hope. And, in the midst of trying times, he was trying to help others find those things.

Joel says the trying times won't be forever. And in the end, God will send God's Spirit to all people to help find the way forward. And the way forward will be by vision, and dreams.

I went to a simple rally yesterday, held by a group of concerned citizens, attended by a handful of clergy and members of Plymouth No Place for Hate. It was a rally to say that Plymouth is for Everyone, and that working for that is good and important work. There wasn't a huge turnout, I don't think it got a lot of publicity and when I looked around there were lots of white people like me. But there was also a biracial family, a lesbian family, a family with a member in a wheelchair, a woman who I know to be married to a man who is Muslim. People often say "Oh Plymouth is such a white town" but there is diversity here.

It felt good to be there. That very morning I had just been on the phone with a clergy friend from Providence Rhode Island. The mosques in the city, she told me, were all leafleted this week with letters saying You People Go Home. Elsewhere in the country, black churches have been defaced. Ugly voices seem to be emboldened. There is reason for concern.

I think this time is our plague of locusts time. It is our crisis, our dilemma to live with, to deal with, to come to terms with. We are in a time when what it means to be an American is being defined in disturbing ways. We are in a time when what it means to be Christian is being defined in disturbing ways. It is more my job to speak to the latter, so here goes:

Though the early church grew out of a sense of being a persecuted people, we white Americans of relative power and privilege have not known much – anything really -- about persecution. Here in this country we have been free to speak our faith. Here in this country we have been free to practice our faith. Now, however, if we do what we believe the gospel calls us to do, that is stand up for people who may not be able to stand up for themselves, we may find we know a little bit more about what it means to be counter-culture. We may find it is suddenly a little more dangerous to be a Christian like that.

The bible says that false prophets often say "Peace, Peace" when there is no peace.

The bible also says there can be no peace without justice. Last night I spent time listening to a sermon by Reverend Dr. William Barber, who you may remember spoke at the Democratic National Convention. In the sermon I listened to last night Barber spoke, compelling, of theological malpractice. He critiqued the religious right saying "You say so much about what God says so little about, and so little about what God says so much about. And what does God say so much about? Justice, justice and peace. Standing up for the poor and oppressed. Welcoming the stranger. Safeguarding the wellbeing of the most vulnerable.

On the other side of the crisis, Joel says, there will be a time of restoration that the whole earth will know. And God will be fully accessible, fully in communication with the people. People will not need to look heavenward and ask where is God? "For I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on male and female servants, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." (Joel, chapter 2, verses 28-29) Do you hear it? Any gaps, any divisions between God and humanity, between human beings themselves will be closed by the coming of the Spirit. Dreams will come, and they will be kept alive -- watered if you will -- by the life giving nourishment of the Spirit.

Can we believe this here and now, in this particular moment, in these particular days? Can the church be the place where dreams are fed and watered?

It bears saying that we won't need everyone to be a dreamer. *We just need to take dreaming seriously.* We are talking about dreaming with our eyes open. It's like Jenny said with her time with the children about the smile... One person has a dream, they share it, say with ten percent, who catch the sense of it, who then share it, and so it spreads. We are talking about those whose dreams for peace and justice make us see and imagine a possibility we hadn't seen before. Think Gandhi. Think Martin Luther King Jr. Think Reverend Dr. William Barber whose sermons on YouTube I recommend to you. (But be forewarned: the sermon I listened to last night was nearly two hours long.)

The bible dreams a dream, to borrow words from Les Mis. God dreamt of freedom, and Moses helped make it real. God dreamt of freedom again, and Jesus came to earth to live among us, to once again make that dream real. This season we might look around and remember a nativity set speaks a dream. A communion table too.

It's Advent and it's a good time to remember our charge: Tell the story; Break the bread; Share the Dream. Be the Dream.

Amen.