Telling Stories of Hope
Joel 2:1-3, 12-13
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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What do you do when the world is falling apart around you? That question had to be real in the hearts of those around the prophet Joel.

After all, these words from Joel come on the heels of a chapter talking about a locust infestation…an event that was not only about the bugs (while that may be enough), but that led to famine. And chapter two continues with a warning about the coming day of the Lord, a day that while being about both judgment *and* restoration, is often represented with imagery that simply scares us.

Add to that the ancient worldview with its assumption that plagues and wars and all bad things were the result of unfaithfulness, and this was a time of not only fear but also guilt.

And the reality is that even as the details differ, we, too, may feel that the world is falling apart around us. Gas prices are on the rise. A long time resident from right here in Iowa City has been deported to a country she has no connection to. Just last week elementary school children in Oregon didn't come home from school because our inaction continues to allow an epidemic of school shootings. There are water shortages. There are wildfires. There are families and friend groups broken apart by all of the stress of these days alongside a decreasing ability to find common ground.

Some days, *we* might feel like the end is near as well.

Some days, even with a different worldview, even as people who can rationally come to other conclusions, *we* might feel like we are being punished for humanity's actions.

Some days, *we* might not know what to do, how to move forward without being overwhelmed.

And it is then, or shall we say now, that we need not only Joel's words at the opening of this chapter, but his words in verses 12 and 13 as well.

Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,
and relenting from punishment.

"Yet even now…" perhaps those are the most powerful transitional words in the prophetic books.

Yes, the prophets come to speak a difficult word, especially a difficult word to those in power, those in control, those who are treating others like commodities to be used, those who have forgotten God's care for the vulnerable, for the poor, for the immigrant, for the children. And yet, the prophets also come with hope.

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“Yet even now…” says Joel.

Even when the locust swarm has done its damage…even when famine has set in…even when you have behaved in ways that seem to leave nothing but destruction in your path…even when God is grieving because of disappointment in God’s own people…

“Yet even now…” says Joel, there is more to the story. Because God’s nature is more…God’s intention is more…God is more.

So that same word comes to us. Even when conflict seems to be a primary communication tool…even when prices are rising and things seem uncertain…even when safety feels less secure…even when creation is crying out…even when rights are being challenged…

“Yet even now…”

Even now God is present. Even now God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love” (Joel 2:13, NRSVUE).

And even now we are invited to return to God…to draw close to God…to cling to God…to allow ourselves to be shaped by God…and to live from the heart of God.

Because what is really what is at the center of these words from Joel is hope.

No matter what…God is always present.

No matter what…God is not done with us.

No matter what…God is loving us and desiring to be in relationship with us.

No matter what…God is holding on to hope.

And this isn’t about ignoring realities…the prophets certainly don’t do that.

This isn’t about turning a blind eye to real pain and harm.

This isn’t about smiling through it all with a toxic positivity that asks people to push their challenges under the surface.

But this is about hope.

Hope that says there is the possibility for another way.

Hope that says that the heart of God is full of love for God’s people.

Hope that says that we are called to live in God’s ways and that we have the power to change the world.

Today is Commitment Sunday. And that is partially about looking toward the coming year and claiming again why this community and the ministry we share together is important to us. That is

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partially about making our commitments of time and money, about saying that what happens at and through First Christian Church is important enough to us and to our world that we will invest in it.

But that's not all that Commitment Sunday is about. It is also about renewing our commitment to God…to remember who God is and to remember who God calls us to be.

Ours is a God who wants to be in relationship with us…with *all* of us. If we keep reading in Joel, we will hear this call is for everyone - just a few verses after what Corinne read for us today it says, "assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy" (Joel 2:16, NRSV). No matter who you are…how old or how young, no matter what else is going on in your life, we are all invited into relationship with God.

And from that relationship we are invited to live as people of compassion and justice, as people of love and joy, as people of hope.

There are plenty of voices telling stories of gloom all around us. And we will keep paying attention to those, keep listening, keep learning where our energy is needed.

But those aren't the only stories that need to be told. No, as people of God, we will tell stories of a God who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13, NRSVUE).

As people of God we will tell stories of a God who loves all of creation and all of humanity.

As people of God we will tell stories of communities that value children and old people; black, white and brown; gay, straight, and bi; men, women, and trans people; citizens and immigrants; those like us and those who are very different.

As people of God we will tell and we will create stories of hope.

May it be so.

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