

Joel and the Coming Spirit

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Preacher: Preaching Cohort

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. My name is Matt Collinson. For those of you who don't recognize me, I used to attend the downtown parish when we used to meet in person, and down there, I used to lead the pride team. Right now, I'm a part of this really exciting preaching cohort, and this week, our group is going to be sharing with you a message from Joel chapter two.

So we're only looking at four verses in Joel two, and I'm going to kick us off by reading them. If you need to find Joel in an old-fashioned Bible, it's towards the end of the Old Testament. Joel's one of the minor prophets. So we're going to look at four verses, chapter two, verses 12 and 13, and then skipping down to 28 and 29. And it reads, 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.

And then skipping down to 28. And afterward, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your children will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions, even on my servants, on all my children. I will pour out my spirit in those days.

So there's a lot here. And we're going to break it down into sort of four sections that we're going to talk about. So I'm going to start off by talking about God's anger at injustice.

[1 : 2 9] Then Meg's going to look at the call to repent from a truly sorry heart. And then Heidi's going to explore the invitation to lament and really be honest about what's broken in the world.

And then Lexi and Skylar are going to talk about hope and end us on a promising note of God fulfilling the promises that have been made. So from the very beginning, if you're like me, you might have noticed that the passage starts with the words, even now. The problem is we don't know exactly where now is, or really how sort of historically what's going on at the time this passage was written. Most scholars think it was probably written sometime in the sort of immediate pre-exile period for the people of Judah. So somewhere between 700 and 580 BC. It might also have been written after exile. But I think the point that we're going to make today is that it doesn't really matter exactly when it was written. We can sort of draw from the passage roughly what's going on. God's people have turned away. And God is angry. Verse 12 begins with this call to repent. But I think it's really important before we jump into the call to repent to recognize that these verses come after a chapter and a half of prophecies of anger, of destruction, of locusts, of the decimation of this nation.

And if you're like me, that is incredibly uncomfortable to read. And we want to skip straight to verse 12 and talk about God's promise of reconciliation. But I don't think we can do that.

I think we have to recognize what came before. I think we have to recognize that all the verses that lead up to the even now are as important as the verses that come after it.

I think we have to face the fact that in this passage, God is angry. And I think rather than just saying, I don't like that, that's scary, let's not talk about it. I think we have to understand what is happening to cause God to be angry and understand what that call to repentance means in that context. So I'm going to read verse 11 to give you a semblance of what came before this promise of, or this call to repentance. So chapter 2 verse 11 reads, The Lord thunders at the head of his army. His forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. The day of the Lord is great. It is dreadful. Who can endure it?

[4 : 14] So here's a sort of a summary of the previous chapter and a half. The army of the Lord is about to destroy the city of Jerusalem. But then verse 12, even now return to me and I will relent from sending this calamity. As I read this, I was thinking a lot about what could cause that sudden, you know, I brought an army and I'm going to bring about destruction. But if you repent, then I'll go away or all the calamity will stop. And the more I thought about it, the more I came to this realization that God doesn't actually want to destroy the city. That is not the goal.

God actually wants repentance. But within the nature of God is a requirement that wrongs and injustice don't go unacknowledged or unchallenged. And I think in this context, it's important to dispel a myth that God is not angry for the sake of it. God is not angry by nature.

God is angry at injustice. We're often told that God's anger stems from people no longer worshipping in the right way. And there is some scripture to suggest that might be true. And I think that's the sort of the easy conclusion we can draw from this passage of that God's people have turned away. And that's why he's storming the gates of Jerusalem. But I don't think that's a complete understanding of the anger of God.

Scripture shows us that when God got angry with people for making idols, for example, it wasn't just that they were making an idol. It was the people, and particularly the poor, were exploited for money, for resources, for labor to create these idols. And that actually was what got God more angry than the creation of the idol in and of itself. So if we take that and apply it back to Joel, we see God threatening the city. But not because he wants to destroy it, but because he wants the people to embrace justice. And this reminds me so much of the protests we've seen over the summer in places like Portland and Louisville and all over the country over the state-sanctioned murders of black men and women like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Sean Monterosa, and so many others.

This fierce, passionate, righteous anger seems like a contemporary equivalent of that anger of God that we see in Joel. Anger that could destroy. Anger that has that power.

[6 : 46] Anger that has that power. But whose goal is not to destroy, but to bring change, to bring justice. Righteous anger is rightly terrifying. But the promise that we see in Joel, and the promise that applies as much today as it did back then, is that when anger is directed at injustice, as it was in Joel and as it is today, if the injustice ends, the anger goes away with it.

Thanks so much, Matt. What a great way to open us up by digging into the context behind these verses. If we haven't met before, my name is Meg Clark, and I currently serve as the Director of Prayer at the Table, and I'm so grateful to be part of the preaching cohort. If you were raised Catholic like me, or are generally familiar with the sacrament of confession or reconciliation, you may recall being a little kid during Advent or Lent participating in confession. Telling a priest all the bad things you did since the last time you've been there, usually something like, I wasn't nice enough to my siblings, or I sometimes lie to my parents, and being told to say some prayers and go and sin no more.

While there is a ton of value in the Catholic practice of confession, I know I never truly focused on the sin no more part. I said my seven Hail Marys and went on with my life. There wasn't a ton of guidance around how to take that confession and make an actual heart change. We read in Joel 2, As Matt said, these verses come after some pretty harsh threats.

God offers the people of Israel an opportunity to be spared, but they can only be spared through genuine repentance, through truly feeling the sorrow and grief that they hold for the wrongdoings they've committed. There is a Jewish grieving practice that we see many times in the Old Testament, Kriya, or rending a garment in grief. The ancient practice of tearing clothes is a tangible expression of the grief and anger felt by loved ones in the face of death. The word Kriya is a Jewish word literally meaning tearing, and it refers to the act of tearing one's clothes or cutting a black ribbon worn on one's clothes. The rending is a striking expression of grief and anger at the loss of a loved one.

And as I said, it's an ancient tradition that we see many times through the Old Testament, when our patriarch Jacob believed that his son Joseph was dead, he tears his garments in Genesis 37. Likewise, in 2 Samuel, we're told that King David and all the men with him tore their clothes upon hearing of the death of Saul and Jacob. Likewise, Job, in grieving the death of his children, stands up and tore his clothes.

[10 : 09] But in Joel, God is saying, this is not the time for Kriya. You need to do something that will actively impact how you live. Rend your heart. Tear your heart in two. Don't think that you can get away with the superficial and outer rending of garments. This is similar to what we see in the book of the prophet Amos.

We hear, I despise, I hate your religious festivals. Your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I have no regard with them. Away with the noise of your songs, I will not listen to the music of your harps. We see a similar thing said by Jesus in the book of Matthew. The religious leaders ask him, why do your disciples break with the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat. And Jesus replies, why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? Throughout the Bible, we see prophets and even Jesus calling for something deeper than just a religious ritual. In this season of Advent, we are invited to examine our own repentance. Are you rending your garments? Noting the mistakes you've made, making some act of mourning, but not necessarily changing any behaviors? Or are you rending your heart, feeling the sorrow that comes with wrongdoing, and setting yourself up for success in not making those mistakes again? Are you listening to the news about rising COVID cases, expressing how sad it is that people are getting it and passing away, but not following CDC recommendations for protecting your community? Are you reposting information and images about anti-racism and the need for systemic change in America, without supporting the groups that are doing this work and continuing to learn and examine your own internalized biases?

How can you commit to rending your heart by creating practices that genuinely impact the way you live for the better? Let's turn back to our passage. We see in verse 13 the reason why we rend our hearts.

For God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and God relents in sending calamity. God wants to protect us and keep us safe.

[12 : 58] God wants to protect us and keep us safe. So engage in a practice of repentance, knowing that God views you with compassion and love, and view yourself in the same light.

I'll turn it over to Heidi to continue digging into this passage and Joel. Hello, Table Church. My name is Heidi Mills, and I've been attending the table for about two and a half years now.

I am so excited to be able to bring this message to you today. In the spirit of Meg's sermon, I wanted to start with a confession. When I first read Joel 2, I struggled with it, because it reminded me of all those fire and brimstone sermons I grew up hearing about in church, with all of this talk of the day of the Lord, which brings nothing but darkness and judgment, with the talk of locust plagues and foreign invasions.

I asked myself if this text was really relevant to our lives today, and if so, how is it relevant? So Matt and Meg already did a good job at highlighting some of the context, but I wanted to bring one point to our attention.

Joel was written in a time of profound crisis for the nation of Israel. They had been restored to their land, but they had no king and very few resources. The institutions that they had relied on, like the monarchy, which represented God's favor to them, had failed them.

[14 : 25] And I can imagine that many of them were wondering if God had not only failed to fulfill his promises, but whether God had broken those promises outright.

So in other words, Joel was writing in a time when Israel was teetering on the edge of national and spiritual catastrophe.

Now, I think we can see some echoes of Joel's circumstance and our current circumstance. Less than a month ago, an election laid bare the deep divisions within our nation and highlighted the fact that our institutions can be tested.

They did not fail, but they were certainly stretched. We are also dealing with a pandemic that by nearly any estimation is spiraling out of control.

There is hope represented by a vaccine, but the fact of the matter is that we are seeing a surge in this nation unlike anything that we've seen previous to this point.

[15 : 31] So because of that, we are asking ourselves these very important questions, like is God responsible? Is this a sign of God's judgment?

Many Christians would claim that it is. Still others don't have an answer. I count myself as one person who doesn't have an answer. And I think Joel in his time would not claim that he has an answer.

Instead, all he does is point the way forward. He refers us back to the source of our hope, which is the character of God. God did not abandon Israel in this moment.

Instead, God called upon the Israelites to return to God. May God already talked about how this return requires repentance, this ability to turn away from our sin and to walk toward a new way of life.

But in this passage, God also asked the Israelites to return with weeping and with mourning. In other words, God asked the Israelites to name their collective pain and to honor it.

[16 : 38] Now, the ancient writers referred to this process of naming our pain, of returning with weeping and with mourning as lament. It's a word that we don't use that often today.

But lament is basically an invitation to bring our full selves, our fears, our worries, our sorrows to God. It honors what we've gone through, both as an individual and as a community.

And we do not have to fear when we come to God and lament, because we know the character of God. And that remains steadfast. As verse 13 says, God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

And he will lend from punishing. This passage would have reminded the Israelites of their exodus from Egypt, this journey from slavery to freedom. It would have given them a small kernel of hope that God would continue to be faithful.

So being able to come to God and lament does not mean that we no longer trust in God's faithfulness. Instead, lament is a way of reorienting our entire selves back to God.

[17 : 48] It acknowledges the brokenness of the world and points her to hope for future restoration. But then the question becomes, yes, that sounds good, but how is that possible?

How do we do this when lament is so hard? Now, I am currently standing in a place that allows me to honor the collective pain of one of the communities that is most dear to me.

I have been working at Joseph's House, which is a small respite and hospice facility for homeless men and women with HIV, AIDS, or other terminal illnesses.

And recently, we had one of our residents pass away. And every time a resident passes away, we honor their memory by placing their name on the mantle with a picture to remember them by.

And then every spring, as life begins to bloom around us, we have a memorial for all the people who have died in the house that year. This past year, we also took the time to remember those who have died from COVID-19.

[18 : 54] I know many of you have lost loved ones to this disease. And we want to say that we are with you in solidarity. Even if we don't know what it's like, we can share with you in that lament.

And then we also lit candles and remembered the victims of the ongoing violence against Black and brown people in this country.

So we light candles, as I said, we say a favorite memory, and we bury their names in the garden as a way to honor their memory and move forward as a community.

So this example, to me, highlights two important facets of lament. First, we have to create the space to lament. Find a sacred space where you are able to come to God and honor your pain.

And when you want to turn away from your pain or ignore it, I hope that you have people in your life that will allow you to find that courage within you to face that pain head on.

[20 : 01] But second, we must remember that lament is not the final word. Rather, lament frees us to hear again the promises of God to restore and to redeem.

This mantle in the ceremony at Joseph's house reminds me that even in the midst of pain, there is still hope for life. We do not forget those who have come before, but we move forward in a way that honors their memory.

In the same way, lament encourages us to remember the loss, but move forward in expectation of new life. So we are in a season of Advent. When we are waiting for the coming of Jesus, we are in the already and the not yet.

Jesus is coming, but he's not yet here. The kingdom is on its way, but it is still just a mustard seed. The spirit is on all people, and yet not all have joined God in the renewal of all things.

So as we move through this week, as we move through the season of Advent, I want to encourage you to create some space to return to God in lament. The pain of the world can only be healed when it is acknowledged.

[21 : 12] But as you lament, remember that God has called you back to God's side. Remember the God that is gracious and merciful. Remember that God is willing to lead us from a time of crisis into a time of ongoing restoration.

Thanks, Heidi, for sharing your insight into this passage and its relevance for us here and now. For those of you that may not know me, I'm Skylar Scholl, and I've been a part of the Table Church family for about three years now.

It's an honor and a privilege to be a part of the church's preaching cohort and to be preaching for my first time today. So enjoy my and our debut. Let's dive in.

The title of my part of today's message is Advent, The Hope of Radical Inclusion. So I want to start by focusing on Joel 2, verses 28 and 29.

This is the message version. I will pour out my spirit on every kind of people. Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters. Your old men will dream.

[22 : 17] Your young men will see visions. I'll even pour out my spirit on the servants, men and women both. So what was God up to then and there in Joel's time?

This is about two and a half millennia ago, roughly. Close in time to Israel's exile, to the Jews' exile. So via Joel, God's prophet, God is challenging the community to turn back to God, back to hope, a hope for all, a radically inclusive hope.

As Joel shows in his language, he goes out of his way, the author, to, say, men, women, servants, young, old. Very important. And especially in this time and place.

This inclusion is really remarkable, especially for the time and place. So, what did it mean then and there for God's people? Everyone is invited to this hope and this waiting, just like we're trying to do in the Advent season, waiting and hoping.

And it's not just this hope and the spirit to be poured out. It's not just for the king or an official prophet. Again, everyone. This inclusion, in some respects, is even more radical than some of the great inclusion we see today.

[23 : 35] So as much as there's a lot of inclusion more to be done today, we do see some bright spots. But again, it's hard to overstate how radical this was in Joel's time and place.

This inclusion Joel points to does have some precedent in the Hebrew scriptures, in the Tanakh, and in particular in the Torah. Let's look at a couple quick examples. So, in Deuteronomy 16, verse 14, chapter 26 and 14, these are all going to be in the message translation.

Foreigners were to be included in festivals and celebrations mandated in law. And then, in Deuteronomy 14, we see in verses 28 and 29, some of the tithe collected by the priests was to be used not only to feed them and their families, but also to help provide food for foreigners, widows, and orphans.

Even not of the Jews themselves, foreign widows, orphans, strangers. It's pretty inclusive, especially for that time and place. And also, we see in Leviticus 23, verse 22, farmers were instructed, commanded, to leave the gleanings, the scraps, the tidbits left over from their fields for the poor and for the foreigner.

Also, we see in Leviticus 25, verse 35, that they are to treat the stranger as they would the poor among themselves. It's big. So, this radical inclusion then pointed towards and previewed Jesus' ministry to come several centuries in the future from Joel's time.

[25 : 11] God's people were waiting, which back then was and still is hard. So, in the short term, they were waiting for the safety and security from invaders to rebuild their cities, their society, vis-a-vis exile.

In the long term, they were waiting for the spirit to be poured out on them, waiting for the Messiah, waiting for Jesus. So, let's bring this forward to now.

What is God up to here and now among us in this time and place? So, as I said, Joel's prophecy points to Jesus' radically inclusive ministry, and Jesus' radically inclusive ministry points to the eventual renewal of all creation, further out in this story arc that we get to participate in.

And again, all means all when it comes to this inclusiveness. So, what does this mean here and now for us, God's people, now that we've talked about and thought about what God's up to here among us and in Joel's time?

So, just like God's people in Joel's time, we're waiting. This Advent season, we're waiting. Already, but not quite yet.

- [26 : 24] So, which, this waiting was and still is hard, right? In the short term, we're waiting for, in a parallel to Joel's time, the ancient Israelites, we're waiting for the safety and security of COVID, within COVID, in the context of COVID, for health and economic pain to be relieved, and for the social and political unrest and division in our society to be healed, right?

Much like there was this turmoil in Joel's time. To rebuild our society and cities, at least metaphorically and symbolically today, if not in some cases, literally. So, we're waiting for the Spirit to be poured out on us, waiting for Jesus' renewal of all things and Jesus' return.

The early church modeled this inclusion we've been talking about to connect some more dots. So, for instance, a great example is Galatians 3, verse 28. Again, the message version.

Paul said, In Christ's family, there could be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us, you are all equal.

You are all equal. That is, we are in a common relationship, all of us, with Jesus Christ. Couldn't have said it better than Paul.

- [27 : 35] So, we are invited and challenged to pick up the story here, ourselves, to lead, to write, to improv the next act or two or three in this chapter, in this long story about patiently waiting, about hope, about the advent of something better.

And we can think of this as a long, long relay race. We're passing the baton, right? The ancient Israelites passed the baton through generations to Joel and his colleagues and his contemporaries and then they passed it to Jesus.

Jesus passed it to the apostles, Paul to Peter and we're going to hear more soon from Lexi about that and then ultimately hear it to us and we get to pass it forward too after we've done our part.

So, keep that in mind. Very important to, you know, as we try to include everyone in God's love, message, and hope this advent season and beyond. So, thank you for listening.

That was my take, hopefully, my insight for you. I hope that spoke to at least one of you out there. Now we're going to hear more from Lexi. Thank you. Those who spoke before me have pulled out some of the main themes of this passage from Joel.

- [28 : 52] God's anger at injustice, the call to repent from a truly sorry heart, the invitation to lament what is broken in the world, and the hope that God will fulfill all of the promises made to God's people in ways even more beautiful and radical than we can ever imagine.

These themes are consistent threads through the scriptures and God's people are constantly called into repentance, lament, and hope. So, it's no surprise that in this advent season we see these same themes showing up.

Advent for the Christian church is a season of waiting and anticipation. We practice those muscles and those are muscles that have been practiced by God's people throughout history.

Before the coming of the Messiah or Christ, God's people eagerly awaited his arrival. They had survived centuries of oppression including slavery, exile, and foreign occupation.

As Matt mentioned, they had also committed their fair share of sin against God and creation. These people had much to repent from and to lament and what sustained them was the hope of the coming Messiah who would make all things right.

[30 : 13] This Messiah had been promised by God through the prophets. During Advent, we even now remember the waiting of Israel for their Messiah when we sing songs like O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, which is my personal favorite Christmas song.

and even though we live on the other side of Christ's arrival, our lives as Christians are still characterized by waiting. Like Heidi said, we live in an in-between where we have seen the fulfillment of so many of God's promises but still wait for the day when all things are made new.

we see an example of God's promise fulfilled in the book of Acts where Peter quotes our passage from Joel. It's from Acts chapter 2.

I'll read it now. When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues as a fire appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

[31 : 29] Now many people who are watching the scene unfold accuse these people of being drunk or filled with new wine but Peter said indeed these are not drunk as you suppose for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel. In the last days it will be God declares that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves both men and women in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy. We see here that what was promised by God through Joel centuries before had been fulfilled in the coming of the Holy Spirit upon God's people.

And we still have the Spirit among us and within us. We as members of Christ's Church are the beneficiaries of the promises God made long ago. Hallelujah. And yet we wait because even though we live on this side of Christ resurrected, even though we have the Spirit with us, we know that all is still not right in the world.

Just look around. I won't provide a list here of all of the things that are broken in the world but I'm confident we're all compassionate, feeling people.

[32 : 59] I'm confident that something is coming to your heart, something that deeply grieves you. I believe this is exactly why God gave us God's Spirit.

Because prophecies and dreams and visions and speaking in different languages, all these things are super cool. I mean, if you saw the disciples gathered on Pentecost speaking in languages that they didn't know just so everyone around could understand the good news they spoke, you'd be pretty impressed.

But this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, it's not for show. God didn't promise prophecies and dreams and visions because it makes for good entertainment.

No, God sent God's Spirit because we need her to live in this in-between world where there is still so much brokenness around us. We need the Spirit as a reminder of God's presence with us.

We need the Spirit to give us wisdom, to give us guidance and comfort and power as we seek to live in step with God's kingdom, embodying God's good news and offering hope to the world.

[34 : 11] So, to recap, what do we do while we wait? I think we've offered a number of invitations today.

We repent of where we have failed to embody God's kingdom. We lament the brokenness and injustice we see around us. We cling to the hope of God's promises and we invite God's Spirit to empower us in our season of waiting.

Let's pray. our God of hope, we thank you that you are slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, that you withhold your anger from us and that you continue to invite us back to yourself again and again.

We're so grateful that you've given us your Spirit to be with us as we wait for the day that all things are made new. Would you please be with us as we practice that waiting?

Amen.