

Hope at 30,000 Feet

Joel 2:23-32

Our reading today is from the prophet Joel – someone we know relatively little about. He is not mentioned by other writers in the Bible. We're not sure when he would have written this prophecy. The best guess is from 800 to 300 BCE. There are some things we can know about the situation and circumstances to which Joel was responding. We know there was a serious plague of locusts which in the ancient world could devastate an economy for years at a time. Since locust outbreaks occur on a regular cycle, there is no way to know to which particular cycle our text is referring. We also know that Joel uses some unusual terminology. The term “children of Zion” and the word he uses for what our Bibles translates as “spring rain” are not often used by other biblical writers so Joel brings a unique voice to the conversation of faith.

So we have a man of faith speaking to his people during a devastating economic period promising them that God has not forgotten them and will send the rains that will renew their lives and livelihood. **Hmmm. Something about this feels familiar.** It would be like a preacher today in a place like this telling you this morning that even though unemployment is staggering, jobs are hard to find, unprecedented numbers are facing foreclosure and the economy stinks, we can trust that God's way still leads us to abundant lives and new possibilities. Many voters aren't believing it and I bet some of us have our doubts. These are hard times in which to have hope. **Hope exists for hard times.** If you think about it, when else would we feel a need to rely on hope?

Hope is a gift that must be nurtured – learned, if you will. The usual response to the challenges of life might be despair, retreat or fear. Hope is the willingness, through faith, to trust that God's grace is sufficient to catch us when we fail and pick us up when we fall.

What is the alternative? Give up? Give in to fear? Block out everyone and keep everything away from you? **Hope is a choice.** People tell us we are crazy to have hope. Maybe it is true but I don't want to face the future without hope. I have known the power of hope in the past. Hope

allows us to be open to the unexpected. Hope makes us ready to respond when opportunities arise. Hope gives us the courage to keep going when the tug of despair drags us by the heels. Hope helps us delay judgment on a person or a situation until we know more information because sometimes first impressions are wrong. Hope gives us reason to trust in those around us even if we are occasionally confused by their actions. Hope is what our children need if they are to survive the bullies of high school.

Hope gives us the courage to step out in faith with a new outreach effort even though we don't have all the answers to what that will look like or where it will take us or what all the costs are going to be. We know it is our call as a congregation to make the world a better place and we are putting our faith into action because we have known the power of hope. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' example of self-giving love. Our hope is built on nothing less than the determination we have not to let the fools distract us. Our hope is built on nothing less than knowing that we have come this far by faith and God's grace has always sustained us.

In watching the endless political ads on television lately I have noticed a common thread in too many of them. An opponent's vote on one piece of legislation or an opponent's off-hand remark at a rally are focused on like a laser and highlighted as the sum total of who the candidate is. There is no context to the vote or the compromises or changes that had to happen to arrive at the final decision. **The excuse is you can't do all that in a 30 second attack ad. The truth is that it is more sensational to pull things out of context and paint an unflattering picture of someone you want to defeat for political office. We're not stupid... and we keep seeing them because these ads work.** To have this focused and narrow perspective motivates people in their decisions on how to vote. It makes for good political strategy. **It makes for a bad journey of faith.** The concern I see every political season is that we as a society get pulled down into this simplistic sound-bite logic and it starts to bleed into other areas of our lives. You can find yourself starting to micro-manage your partner. **That's an exercise in futility!** You can find yourself not making the effort to consider all your alternatives in a financial decision because

that would take a lot of time and energy when we would rather have sound bite decisions. We can back away from the hard work of building community because that doesn't happen in 30 seconds and it takes work and effort and trust. Trust only occurs over time and experience. To have hope means we have to back away, at times, from the specificity of life and look at things with a longer view. We need to be able to see the world from 30,000 feet. Here's what a dirt road looks like when you're on it. Here it is at 30,000 feet. That's what hope does for us. It helps us see the bigger picture – the broader view – so that our choices are not defined by simplistic answers or too-easy sound-bites.

Joel warned his people about being too concerned with the locust plague. How could they not? It impacted everything about their lives. Just look around and you can see the devastation the locusts caused. Take the long view, Joel says. God sends the spring and autumn rains. The drought of your life right now is not the whole story of who you are. The obstacle you are facing right now is not the sum part of your future. The problem holding you back right now is not the final word on your worth. Hope calls us to step back, look around and consider the perspective of God.

My name is Paul Eknes-Tucker and I approved this message.

Sources:

www.homileticonline.com Chosen Hope, October 2010.