

Sermon: Everyday Strength

Year C, Proper 25

[Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14](#)

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Today's reading from the Prophet Joel sounds familiar, but not quite right. That's because the reading from Acts we use on Pentecost quotes it. When the Holy Spirit shows up like an earthquake and a mighty wind and as flames over people's heads fifty days after Easter, Peter quotes Joel, about sons and daughters prophesying and the old and young men having visions (Joel 2:28).

But we don't often hear directly from Joel. He's a minor prophet, meaning not that he's unimportant, but that he was succinct. The minor prophets, those who were able to share God's message briefly, were assembled together into the Book of the Twelve. Joel was called to tackle one specific incident in Israel's history. He handles it really well, but because he's so focused, I think we tend to walk past him. So maybe today we should back up and see what he's saying.

The Prophet Joel is responding to a plague of locusts that have hit Israel for multiple years. They've eaten everything. The crops in the fields, the grazing lands, every living thing. Their arrival is coupled with a drought. So all the reserves are depleted. There's nothing for the animals to eat, there's nothing for the humans to eat, and even if everything turns around tomorrow, they've eaten even the portion of the harvest they had saved for seed. In a time when each nation had its own god, the people of Israel were shamed before the world for having a god who was unable to control the locusts or the rain. It's risky to follow a god that weak, and frankly you'd be foolish to do so.

Joel starts with an easy to understand response. It's raining abundantly now (Joel 2:23). The threshing floors will be full of grain, the wine vats will overflow (Joel 2:24). Abundance is back, God is back. You can hold your head up high. You didn't follow a weak god, you weren't a fool.

But then Joel continues. Sure, God is back. Because God never left. You recognize God in the lush rains and the life-saving harvests. But God was there in locusts and in the drought. God sent both, God's great army that was sent against the people of Israel (Joel 2:25). Why did God send the locusts and the drought? Not only do we not get an answer to that, we aren't really entitled to ask the question. God is going to show up in this world the way God is going to show up.¹ We don't get a vote. We may appreciate the rain and the big harvests and dread the locusts and the droughts, but we don't make the call. Our job is to hold onto what we know, *You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other* (Joel 2:27).

God is sending it all, the rains, the harvest, the locust, the drought. God is sending the Holy Spirit poured out *on all flesh* (Joel 2:28), *on your sons and your daughters* (Joel 2:28), *on your old men and your young men* (Joel 2:28), *on the male and female slaves* (Joel 2:29). God is sending the prophecies, the dreams, the visions (Joel 2:28); God is sending the portents in the

¹ Donna Schaper, "Proper 25, Homiletical Perspective, Joel 2:23-32" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 195.

heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke (Joel 2:30). We can notice all of that, we can respond to God's presence everywhere. Or we can pick and choose and be ashamed when god only shows up where we want to see the presence of the small and powerless god we have designed for ourselves.

How do we trade down to this small, happy-clappy God that shows up in gentle showers and good harvests and all the nice things of this world? How do we design a God that has nothing to do with the cancers and car wrecks and overdoses that are piling up around us?

Because we listen to the only too human voices around us and decide they're sending the prophecies and the visions, the dreams and the portents. We too want to stand in front of people and thank God that we are not like other people, thieves, rogues and adulterers (Luke 18:11). That not only do we follow the rules and fast one day a year when everyone in the neighborhood is supposed to fast, but we have lives that allow us to fast twice a week (Luke 18:12).² We have so much wealth that we pay taxes not only on what we're supposed to pay taxes on, we pay taxes on all our income (Luke 18:12).³ That sounds like strength to us. If we are not so wealthy that we can show off our money, if we are not so healthy that we can give up food in some kind of ritual fast twice a week, well, then we must be weak. A strong God would never be like that. A strong God sends the rain and the abundant harvests. The droughts and the locusts? They're what happen to people who aren't strong enough to provide infinite resources for themselves.

Who is a strong friend? The one who drinks your best scotch at your Christmas party, the one time a year you see them or the one who helps you rake your lawn when you've pulled a muscle in your back? Strength isn't being there in the good times. Strength is being there all the time. Every parent knows that you don't need strength to show up for the championship game; you need strength to drive the wretched child to practice for 16 weeks every year for 7 years when the child complained about you, the team, the coach, the weather, their cleats and everything else the entire way there and the entire way back. Strength is showing up every day.

Stewardship is one of the ways we show our strength. If we are going to show up every day as a part of Brookline's community, we need to gather our strength. 25 pounds of spaghetti not only needs to show up, but it needs to be cooked and served and kept in separate piles so the 4 pounds of gluten free spaghetti isn't contaminated by the 21 pounds of regular spaghetti. We need to be able to put out chairs and tables in a warm, well lit room and welcome in dozens of runners and community members. We need to offer them a true welcome. Did we make over \$800? Yes, we did. And we'll put that to good use as we continue to do our best to show up every day. Not just when the gentle showers fall and the wine vats are overflowing.

Stewardship is showing that we know that God is in the midst of our lives, and that LORD is our God and there is no other. We can demonstrate that through a safe, warm building, and a well-compensated minister, with insurance policies that are up to date, and SHARE families who have gifts under their tree at Christmas. We can demonstrate that through stepping up when disaster strikes on the other side of the globe through the UCC Global ministries, and when organizations need financial support for the long slow journey that is recovery from addiction. There are so many ways that stewardship allows us to show that we know that God is in the midst of our lives.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975: 223.

³ Barclay, 224.

If stewardship is showing our strength, showing our intention to show up every day, good times and bad, if stewardship is showing that we know that God is in the midst of our lives, then stewardship is also about building an environment where we can stand far off, not even look up to heaven, but beat our breasts and say, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). Where we can come as we are, broken and flawed and unfinished and ask God for mercy. Where we admit we are exactly like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers and, yes, even tax collectors.

Stewardship needs to be a way that we show that we celebrate full threshing floors and overflowing wine vats, by sharing the grain and the grapes we have with others. Stewardship also needs to be a way we show that we celebrate that abundance because, man, oh man, have there been times when the drought took everything that the locusts didn't eat. We know the spare, thin times when we didn't have a loaf of bread to bless ourselves with. Maybe we always had enough to eat, but we can all remember times when we knew that we weren't good enough, wise enough, tough enough, crafty enough, patient enough, we simply weren't enough. And we hoped that the world never learned of our weakness.

If we're truly stewarding the gifts God has given us, we're absolutely building up the grain and the wine to share. But we're also making space for all the people who know what it is to stand off to the side, admitting we are sinners and asking God for mercy.

Because whether it is Joel, 450 years before Jesus's ministry, or Jesus himself, we are assured that *all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted* (Luke 18:14), that *everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved* (Joel 2:32). Stewardship is building the strength to show up, every day, and stand with the sinners who are asking for mercy. Because that's all of us, one day or another.