

God's Dream for the Earth

Psalm 65 *The river of God is full of water....*

Joel 2:23-32 *Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh....*

The Book of the prophet Joel is brief, intense, and vivid. We know little, if anything, about its origin or its author. It begins with the devastation of the land by swarms of locusts. Are these actual insects? Or a metaphor for an invasion by Assyria or Babylon or some other nation? We do not know for sure. Whatever the crisis, it is a wakeup call for the people and their priests to change ways of living understood to be the cause for the calamity. This is how Israel understood its life. Faithfulness to God, being in harmony with God's purposes, gratitude for and acceptance of life as it comes from God...these things make for peace and prosperity. Unfaithfulness in the form of greed, the grasping of power, oppressing other people, ingratitude—these are the seeds of disaster.

Yet there is always the opportunity to recognize what went wrong and to correct it. The pivotal sentences come at the very center of the book: "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, and abounding in steadfast love."

This is simply recognizing that our actions have consequences. We continue in destructive or self-destructive ways, and things only become worse. We change our way of living, acting, thinking, and circumstances can begin to change for the better. There is always the possibility of change, even when things seem to be at their worst.

Psalm 65 is a richly-painted landscape of the creation as the outpouring of God's goodness and bounty. Reading it, we feel gratitude and joy stirring in our hearts for the sheer beauty and abundance of creation. Praise of God begins to flow from us. Not only is the creation the source of our sustenance. It is also the source of our spiritual nourishment, our awareness and praise of God.

Joel offers a bleak vision of the loss of that bounty, which can be restored when human beings repent, change their hearts, minds, and actions. As that happens, there is an outpouring of God's spirit on all people. God's bounty in creation flows forth once again when we decide to turn from unfaithfulness to faithfulness, from unhealthy ways of living to healthy ones, from injustice to justice, from war-making to peace-making. When we as individuals, communities, and nations wake up to our own responsibility for our predicament, the floodgates of God's bounty begin to open once again. This is not the "gospel of prosperity" that is popular in mega-churches these days, that if we just get right with God, we will "have it all." God's bounty is the creation itself which is made to sustain the whole human family and to give joy to all. The prophetic writings perceive that when there is injustice, greed, self-centeredness, and violence, the whole creation suffers. Global warming, widespread hunger and poverty, and our ongoing wars and addiction to war...these are not God's doing, but ours.

As we come to our senses, and the earth resumes its bounty, God's spirit is poured out on all people. Everyone, says Joel. Adults, men and women. Slaves. Old people and children. Everyone will be filled with God's dreams and visions. All human beings are made to be as bountiful and good as the creation itself.

So the picture of our life as God intends it is two-fold: enjoying, sharing, and delighting in the abundant creation, and living out of God's spirit that fills us with God's visions and dreams for life. That is the vision of the kingdom of God. Following Jesus, whose life and teachings centered in that vision, means living that life now. The kingdom of God is not in the far distant future or in some other-worldly place. It is here and now whenever we awaken to the earth as God's good and bountiful creation, and to our own lives as God's children.

How can we hear Joel's message today? We have not been visited by swarms of locusts, though stink bugs have been all over the place this fall! We have not been invaded by ravaging nations. The events of September 11, 2001, terrible as they were, cannot be made into such a thing. Instead, we have become the pre-emptive invaders

of nations, draining our human and natural resources to sustain a war economy. Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer, poet, and essayist, writes this in his new book, CITIZENSHIP PAPERS:

“It is understandable that we should have reacted to the attacks of September 11, 2001, by curtailment of civil rights, by defiance of laws, and by resorting to overwhelming force, for those actions are the ready products of fear and hasty thought. But they cannot protect us against the destruction of our own land by ourselves. They cannot protect us against the selfishness, wastefulness, and greed that we have legitimized here as economic virtues, and have taught to the world. They cannot protect us against our government’s long-standing disdain for any form of self-sufficiency or thrift, or against the consequent dependence, which for the present at least is inescapable, on foreign supplies such as oil from the Middle East. And they cannot protect us from what may prove to be the greatest danger of all: the estrangement of our people from one another and from our land.”

What has been visited upon us for a long time, as a nation and as a human family, has been a view of life resulting in the devastation of the earth, the creation itself. We have been overtaken by grandiose dreams of industrialization, personal prosperity and greed, addiction to consumerism, and technology out of synch with our life-giving relationship to the world around us. We are at the brink of collapse and are losing the bounty of the creation because of our thoughtless and soul-less exploitation.

We are the swarm of locusts. We are the invaders and conquerors of our own life. And the call is to wake up to who we really are and to our relationship to the world around us, to the creation. Can we wake up in time? In Joel’s terms, can we repent in time, change not only our way of living but our whole way of seeing reality? I don’t know. But we must do it.

I believe that of foremost importance is a deep and radical transformation in our awareness as a human family, the fundamental way we look at life around us. We need to wake up from the nightmare we have been in, the misunderstanding and destructiveness of our relationship with the creation of which we are integrally a part.

We must be changing our patterns of living so that the earth can express its natural, God-implemented bounty. Deeper than that, however, is the necessity of changing our whole spiritual outlook. It is a matter of recognizing what has been there all along, but which we took for granted, misused, and exploited, to the detriment of the creation and our own existence. This change has many dimensions. As I read from Psalm 65 and Joel this week, two came immediately to my mind and heart. Gratitude and acceptance, or contentment. They go together. Gratitude for what IS, more than discontent with what IS NOT. That sounds heretical because we are so indoctrinated in the “progress” mentality, always thinking we have to make things better and better, or that we will not be happy until we have more and more. The deepest spiritual attitude, however, is gratefulness for what is, even in the midst of difficult circumstances. It is a readiness to receive whatever comes, knowing that there are times of challenge and struggle, as well as times of peacefulness and wellbeing.

When there is draught, we accept the draught. When there is rain, we accept the rain. But in all things, we practice gratitude that arises with our awareness of the sacred dimension of life in all its goodness and mystery. When there are difficult times--those swarms of locusts--we accept them in the sense that we learn to see more deeply into them, patiently and wisely discerning what we are to learn about ourselves and the ways we are living.

The dreams and visions that God’s spirit is awakening in us today have to do with a very ancient and yet, for us, new understanding of life. It is life in harmony with God and God’s creation, learning once again how to live as part of the whole fabric of the earth. For too long we have fought against the earth, seeing it as a “thing” that we have to conquer or use for our unsustainable purposes. What we have missed and what got us into trouble was our disconnection from the creation. What we most need now is to reconnect, to see, celebrate, and receive what God gives to all of us through the world God created. It is our physical sustenance and our spiritual nourishment. No matter what changes we make as individuals and nations in response to the global warming crisis and the justice issues of hunger, poverty, and war, they will not be significant or lasting unless our hearts and minds and spirits are changed. That comes as we open our hearts to God’s spirit that is awakening in us God’s dream for the earth and for us.

The psalm and Joel's words remind us that the change from devastation to bounty for all begins with each of us. We want Mr. Bush to change. We want the global corporations to change. We want policies to change. But it has to begin with us, as individuals and as the new community Christ has called into being, as we ourselves awaken to life as it really is—an abundant creation to be cherished, protected, and shared by all people and in which we taste and see God's goodness. Only as we ourselves are living God's dream for the earth can we then call others into that same dream, that same way of living.