

Luke 18:9-14
Joel 2:23-32

Sometimes as the weather turns to Fall and we inch closer and closer to Halloween, life can start to feel a little gloomier, a little grayer. Sure, there's the beautiful Fall colors as the once green leaves turn various shades of yellow, orange, and red, and there's a slight chill in the air that makes going out feel a little brisk. But for some people, myself included, there's that creeping sensation (and not in a fun spooky way) of the darkness and gloom that often comes with the colder months as everything frosts over and the beauty of summer takes a pause.

Maybe it's just my body still being used to the slump that comes in mid-October around Fall break and midterms, when the joy of the new school year opportunities has worn off quite a bit, and the tension has risen as deadlines fast approach. And there's this feeling that all is moving just a little too fast. But this time of year always brings out a melancholy feeling in me, even when there's joyous activity going on around me.

Whatever your personal feelings about this time might be, if you feel the gloom of the start of the colder months, the dread of looming deadlines, maybe you're feeling burnt out, overwhelmed, overworked, maybe you're not feeling any of this at all, that's great too! But our passage starts out a little doom and gloomy, so we're going to start there.

The book of Joel is a short but impactful story about the Israelites. It's a story that starts out by saying "tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children yet another generation." Our prophet, Joel, wanted to make sure the Israelites remembered this story.

Joel starts the story off by telling of the time when the locusts ravaged the land the Israelites were living on. The cutting locusts came and ravaged the land and left. After that the swarming locusts came and continued to ravage the land and left. AND THEN the hopping locusts came and destroyed the land and left, and folks if that wasn't enough, finally devouring locusts came and took all that was left of the land. Hopefully there's a little bit of hyperbole in Joel's writing here, but either way, far too many locusts have come and plagued the land. There's a physical drought the Israelites are living through and times are hard.

Fortunately, we're not living through a plague of locusts, and Michigan definitely didn't show signs of an impending drought this past week. That doesn't mean that we haven't been living through our own metaphorical or spiritual drought.

During my short time here at First Pres I have watched us do amazing things! We started new mission projects like making blankets for palliative care patients at University hospital, we donated over 60 Thanksgiving bags for families at Hope Clinic (when our goal was 25), we have grown different programs like our choir and bells, we have transformed spaces to make them COVID friendly, hybrid friendly, family friendly.

But there have also been times when things haven't been so amazing here. While some programs bloomed, other programs felt like they were scraping by. Some people had a renewed sense of energy and excitement and others were tired, burnt-out, just doing the motions to get through the day. The pandemic changed a lot in the church and in the world and has left many of us weary and needing a sense of revitalization. So as we chase what is hopefully near the end of the pandemic and look towards a new season of our life, I'm curious what feels restorative for you? What brings back that feeling of renewed life and sense of jubilation about the world around you?

Unfortunately, our passage in Joel doesn't give us a straightforward checklist of things to do to move out of a season of drought and plague. There's no simple 5 step how-to guide that's a google search away. Though our prophet doesn't give us an easy answer, he does allude to some of what the Israelites did to get through this trying time. They engaged in a spiritual practice of prayer and fasting together as a whole community.

While that isn't a shocking revelation, what is shocking to me is that everyone in the land is called to do the same spiritual discipline together. Joel doesn't call just the elders and deacons to come pray, it's not just the ministers who are fasting. Joel called out to EVERYONE, the men, women, children; anyone who was on the land was to come pray and fast together. "Gather ALL the land's people to the temple of the Lord your God" is what Joel writes.

And I'm left to wonder how impactful an action can be when we ALL do it together? Not just the staff doing something, not just our elders and deacons doing something, but ALL of us, the body of Christ...

The pandemic has left many of us wondering "what's next"? Thankfully we didn't live through a plague of locusts that caused a drought, but we've lived through our own drought during this time. The drought of being overworked, burnt-out, emotionally and physically exhausted from the trauma of living through a pandemic that caused an unprecedented amount of change. Maybe your drought is showing itself now, as life starts to shift away from COVID precautions and living with COVID is becoming a more normalized part of our lives. We each have our own drought, our own plague of

locusts we have been contending with, so I return to my question from before: What helps you to feel whole? Renewed? Restored?

In our passage today, God says “I will repay you for the years that the cutting locust, the swarming locust, the hopping locust, and the devouring locust have eaten...” But the Hebrew word “repay” here doesn’t necessarily mean “to pay back” or to reimburse someone with money or material goods as one might think. The word “repay” has its roots in the same word group as “shalom” which means peace. The word “repay” therefore has implications of being made whole again and finding restoration, rather than a monetary version of repayment.

Now I can’t tell you what would be restorative for you and your personal drought, but I’m happy to explore that with you over coffee or a meal sometime. What I want to explore right now is what our church might find restorative during this next season.

One of the things I love about First Pres is how many opportunities we offer folks, there’s truly a little bit of something for everyone here. But something I’ve noticed and am concerned by is the silos we have created in our various ministry programs. And these silos aren’t necessarily bad; they’ve been a way to keep us connected in our small groups during a time when we wanted to limit our social network and the amount of people we interact with. But as we vision ahead as a church, I don’t think these silos are something we want to keep. I don’t think we want to tell the next generation “out of the pandemic came these individual ministry opportunities, so now you must choose the one you love for the rest of your life, and tell your children that and their children that.” Do we?

I think something restorative for us as a church is to start bridging those gaps between ministry areas and truly coming together as the beautifully diverse community we are. How wonderful would that be to tell our future generations? Out of the pandemic came opportunities for collaboration, for trying new ministry areas, finding new gifts and talents for the church?

I want to give a loving challenge to everyone, come to one church event that you normally wouldn’t come to, yes staff that includes us too. Come to one gathering that intrigues you, but you would normally say “that’s not for me” or “well I’m already involved here, that’s enough.” If you’re a mission person and you find great joy in going to all of our mission opportunities, come to a concert! If

you come to every mature ministry gathering, try Advent Happening or Peeps & Pizza! If coming in-person doesn't work for you yet, join our coffee hour online! Or better yet, form your own online event and invite folks to that!

And for those who want a harder challenge, try volunteering in a new ministry area (I promise if you try it once and it's not for you we'll let you go, we won't hold you hostage). If you love singing in the choir and playing bells, try volunteering with our youth group or children's faith formation opportunities. If you're an avid knitter for our Knit Night group, try volunteering for one of the events congregational life hosts.

While a bit cheeky, this isn't a plea for more volunteers. I truly believe that one way we can move into our next season as First Presbyterian Church is by finding ourselves engaged with this community again and engaged in new ways. Because we're a big church it's all too easy to feel comfortable or even worse "stuck" in your ministry area. So I want to encourage you to engage and build relationships with new folks in new ways. As we gaze upon a new season of First Pres's life, I hope you can see your unique and important part in this community and the gifts you bring to the table and how YOU can shape the next story we tell future generations.

Just as Joel said, "tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children yet another generation." and I know it will be a story worth telling. A story of re-engagement, a story of renewed ministries, a story of First Pres.

Amen.