# Joel 2:23-32

Uniquely among the prophetic books, Joel gives no concrete clue of its date. In the pre-modern era, Joel was assumed to be one of the earliest prophets—hence its position among the Twelve Prophets. In the modern era, he was assumed to be one of the last prophets: he refers to the Greeks in 3:6. In the post-modern era, we do not know when Joel lived, but that ceases to trouble us. The important thing is that the book arose out of a specific crisis, a locust plague (or conceivably an invasion pictured as a locust plague): see v. 25. The earlier part of the book thus offers guidance on how to understand and how to respond to a crisis of that kind, while here Joel looks to the other side of the disaster.

In Joel’s vision, God has begun the process of restoring the land. The first key to that is rain. While Israel can always be sure that the sun will shine to ripen the grain, it cannot be sure that at earlier stages in the agricultural year the rain will fall at the times when it is needed. The first of these comes in the fall, when people need the “early rain” to soften the ground so that it can be plowed and the seed then be sown. The second comes in the spring, when people need the “later rain” to help the young plants to grow to full size. Joel speaks as if both rains have fallen (v. 23). The vision is thus implicitly located in early summer. The rains have not only fallen, but fallen abundantly. Yet people have recently been reminded that rain is only the first key to a harvest. While the sun to ripen produce can be taken for granted, protection from pestilence cannot. The fulfillment of the “natural” cycle depends upon there being no further locust plague.

We cannot tell whether the rains have in reality yet fallen or whether so far this has only happened in Joel’s vision. In v. 22 the verbs are also past tense (“the wilderness pastures have become green, the tree has borne its fruit, the fig tree and the vine have given their full yield”), but NRSV rightly assumes that it is only within Joel’s vision that the harvest has actually happened. It might make better sense of chapter 2 as a whole to assume that the rains, too, have actually arrived only within the vision. The vision as a whole would then belong to the period of the plague and its aftermath. Restoration is still entirely promise.

But either in vision or in history the people stand between the gift of rain and the growth to harvest. Recent experience has reminded people that harvest is not guaranteed until it has happened. What if another plague comes? Either in life or in imagination, they stand at the moment when hope might die again. Joel promises that that they will indeed see an abundant harvest (v. 24). The loss of the preceding years will thus be made up (v. 25).

It is a bold promise. Prophecy is difficult, the Chinese proverb says, especially regarding the future. We know how easy it is for weather forecasters to be embarrassingly wrong about what may happen tomorrow. But Joel has been given the conviction that this particular plague did not result from chance, from the vagaries of nature. It had a moral significance. That cannot be universalized; not every plague is an act of divine chastisement (cf the story of Job). But this one was. If the people have responded aright, or if they do respond aright, then they can be restored.

The way Joel makes the point is to speak of the gift of rain as an act of “righteousness” (v. 23). The Hebrew word, *tsedaqah*, does not have an equivalent in English. Different translations use the words vindication, justice, “in due measure”, or kindness. *Tsedaqah* is a relationship word, and it suggests doing what is right by people with whom one is in relationship. So when God acts faithfully to Israel, and specifically when God restores Israel after some disaster, this is an act of *tsedaqah*, an act of righteousness or justice. This is so not because Israel deserves this treatment, but because God is acting faithfully in the context of that relationship.

So far we might have read this promise as signifying the reversal of a single, isolated calamity. Vv. 26-27 make clear that it is more than this.

Actually the calamity itself was more than a single calamity. It was a very realization of the Day of Yahweh (1:15; 2:1). Old Testament thinking typically understands matters in this way. When we experience God’s judgment or God’s blessing, it is an experience of God’s final judgment and God’s ultimate purpose finding realization within our own experience. So the calamity was the Day of Yahweh’s wrath arriving, and the restoration will be the Day of Yahweh’s love being consummated.

That day will have three aspects. First, it is a day when people will eat in plenty. It is easy for Western people to take food for granted and to see it as not very spiritual, but the Old Testament knew that food could not be taken for granted and knew that God was very concerned with food, as part of God’s concern with the body. The body and food are spiritual realities.

Second, it is by means of these that people will know that God is in their midst. They will know once more that Yahweh is indeed God. Often prophets see God’s acts in history as the proof that Yahweh is God. Joel promises that events in nature will do that. In each case the evidence is not merely that an event takes place, whether a political one or a natural one. It is that this event takes place in fulfillment of God’s word. It is the ability to say what you are going to do and then do it that shows that Yahweh is God. This day will demonstrate that this is so, and thus make the day a day of worship.

Third, it is a day of glory. The calamity that the people have experienced has made the past year a time of shame (see v. 17). Like a political defeat such as the fall of Jerusalem, the locust plague indicates either that they are experiencing God’s judgment or that they have been committed to an incompetent God. Either way, they look stupid. God’s abundant blessing will prove that neither of these ideas is true. This calamity was the Day of Yahweh happening; therefore Yahweh can also promise that they will never again be shamed. They have gone through the Day of Yahweh, and will not have to go through it again. The promise reminds us of God’s promise after the flood, when God swore, “Never again”.

There is another aspect of the people’s need. From the beginning of their experience, God’s spirit had been alive in their midst (see e.g., Isaiah 63:10, 11, 14; Haggai 2:5). A person’s “spirit” is their personal dynamic, expressing itself in powerful actions that fulfill their will. So God’s spirit is God’s personal dynamic, expressing itself in powerful actions that fulfill God’s will. Although Israel knew that God’s spirit had come to dwell in their midst, at the same time they knew it was possible to grieve God’s spirit and for God’s spirit to be withdrawn (see Isaiah 63:10; Psalm 51:11). The failure that had led to the locust plague would be bound also to involve the withdrawing of that spirit.

Merely renewing nature would therefore not resolve the problems that the locust plague exposed. Something else was needed. Vv. 28-29 promise that further gift. In the past, women and men had prophesied, had revelatory dreams, and seen visions. In Joel’s day, that perhaps seemed to belong to the distant past. God promises that it will again become present reality. Indeed, it may promise that God will do something more spectacular than the people have previously known. Prophecy, dreams, and visions will be more prevalent than they have been before. Whether this is something new or not, age, sex, or class will not constrain the pouring out of God’s spirit.

Acts 2 sees this promise fulfilled at the first Pentecost, but it is not now fulfilled in the life of the church. The promise therefore provides a basis for praying, expecting, and acting so that it may be so. Acts 2 also sees vv. 30-32a as fulfilled at Pentecost. To us it probably looks more like a description of cataclysmic events at the End, of the kind that are also described in a passage such as Luke 21. That reflects the fact that Pentecost is itself indeed a partial realization of the End. Joel promises that when cataclysms like the flood threaten the world, it is an invitation to us to turn to God for protection.