

Sunday, July 10, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Yet, Even Now

The prophet Joel has painted a vivid picture for us. A land stripped bare of vegetation, dry and parched – no livestock, no life. This scene would not only be one of horror in terms of food and livelihood, it would also mean that there was nothing available to sacrifice to the Gods.

There were no first fruits, or doves or fatted calves. So the people were not only physically starving, they were in danger of spiritually starving as well.

Joel perceived this environmental catastrophe as punishment for his people’s turning away from Yahweh, the one and only God.

But Joel believes in a God of forgiveness and grace – a God who hears his people’s cries and responds.

The passage that we read starts with the words, “Yet, even now.” Through Joel, God is letting the people know that even now, with all they have done, he will take them back.

Joel seizes on this promise and encourages his people to repent. He urges them to return to God with all of their hearts.

He tells us that God has said, “Rend your hearts, not your garments.”

God is calling for internal transformation, not external signs.

Joel uses the words of psalm 103 to remind his community that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love.

He continues, by promising that God relents from punishing.

The picture of Joel’s community is so easily transferable to our own lives.

We have been witnesses to the devastation of entire communities by human action and by natural occurrences.

In Japan, an atomic bomb was dropped and a city destroyed; in Chernobyl, a nuclear plant erupted and everything was gone.

In New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina roared through and left chaos in her wake.

But in each of these mega-disaster situations, we have seen rebirth, growth from ashes, a resurrection of sorts.

God continues to work, even when we may think things are hopeless.

God is ever present.

Disasters like these may seem remote to us, but our own everyday lives contain plagues and droughts as well.

I spent last week at Silver Lake, ministering to 150 children between the ages of 10 and 18. In addition there are about 40 counselors and staff between the ages of 18 and 25.

Much of my time was spent in individual conversations with young people who were experiencing a range of personal crises.

It was intriguing to me to have my study of the book of Joel juxtaposed with these adolescent dilemmas. To each child, the personal issues they were experiencing seemed insurmountable.

Each was in their own place of devastation – certain that there was no way out.

I imagine them standing in the middle of Joel’s parched land, lamenting that there is simply no solution, no hope.

And yet, in the midst of their dilemmas, I was able to introduce God.

I was able to say, “What if you gave some of this up to God?”

I encouraged them to “take some time to be still and listen for God in their lives.”

I asked them to “think of other times in your life when you have thought you wouldn’t get over something and now you can look back and see that you survived.”

Overall, the children were quite resilient. Many of their issues were addressed with thoughtful conversation and a bit of prayer. We talked a lot about choices: choosing who you want to be; who you want to be friends with; what you want to do; how you want to be perceived.

In the third chapter of Joel he exclaims, “Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.”

We live our lives in this valley.

The choices that we make each day determine whether we will experience God as gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love or whether we will live in a parched, dry land.

The good news is that God has given you the power to make these choices.

God’s message, through Joel, is that God is ever present, ready to help you out of your darkness to welcome you into the light.

I want to share a poem that one of the young men at Silver Lake, Jacob Brown, wrote and shared with us at a worship service:

Here I am
Standing between the light and the dark
Learning control
Mastering the balance
For when they are combined, drawn together
Amazing things are possible
So dance with me
Between the light and dark
And see if the world will not change
See if it can stand being contained in its prison
Once it knows of its potential
Dance with me and bring a future that no one will resist.
Amen

When we read the book of Hosea we were left with the questions of trust and obedience. Joel poses different questions.

He asks us if we can remain hopeful in the face of adversity?

Are we willing to be patient as God leads us out of darkness and into light?

Do we wallow in our catastrophes or do we set to work on recovery from the start?