

## Call and Response

Joel 2-1-2, 12-17

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In the middle of January, the state of Hawaii received a warning that a missile was on its way and instructed; it turned out that the employee who sent the message thought the moment was very real, but as we know, it should have gone out as a drill. Carla Herreria, a journalist who lives on the island took time, for her own sanity, to write a very personal article about that morning. She was on her way to the beach when the alert came up on her phone. She and her fiancé Jonathon grabbed some water and went down to wake up their neighbor and then all three went to the basement of their apartment building.

As they were gathered there with other residents, her phone rang; her sister called to say that they were leaving for their in-laws and she wanted Carla to be there too. “It’s high up on a hill, she said. There are fruit trees and chickens on the property. It’ll be safer. We’ll all be together.” Carla and her fiancé decided to leave the relative protection of the cement basement and hit the road. She texted ‘I love yous’ to her family on the mainland as they sped toward the shelter of fruit trees and chickens.

And then they came up behind a tractor. Though they were still moving, it must have felt like they were standing still. The title of the article was, “We Thought We Were Going to Die, So We Fought Over a Tractor”; she wanted him to pass the tractor, he said they could get into a head-on collision; and she reminded him they were about to die in a missile attack anyway. Finally the tractor driver waved them around – and as they drove the final miles, they were waiting for the big boom that never came.

She said she wrote the article “because, “I need a recorded account of the way I felt that morning. I want to remember how I reacted, how I let my emotions tumble and toss, flare up and fight. And I wanted to learn how I can be better for the next time the world might end” (Huffington Post).

This is exactly the situation that Joel described at the beginning of the reading; scholars differ in interpretation as to whether Joel is using the word army as a metaphor for an onslaught of locusts or if he was likening locusts to an on-coming army. In either case, there was danger on the horizon.

Joel’s text alert would have read;

EMERGENCY ALERT

ARMY THREAT INBOUND TO JUDAH

SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.

The Hebrews referred to this as the coming of the Day of the Lord. The phrase, the Day of the Lord, has come to represent the hope that there will be an event in human history will usher in God's sovereignty and control – and it alludes to the fear human beings have of God's sovereignty and control. This is one of the two-edged swords of our faith, God comes with salvation and judgment. I believe with all my heart God does not want a nuclear holocaust, nor terrorism, nor anymore war on this earth; I believe with all of my heart that God still has hope the human family will rise from the yeast of those who practice the Way of Jesus Christ, and through compassion and love become able to live in peace. So while there is a great deal of warrior language attached to the expected Day, I'm saying that I do not subscribe to the notion that this Day has to arrive through Armageddon (though some do); throughout the scriptures, there are also equal liturgical experiences of the Day of the Lord, in other words, think Easter!

Learning to discern God's actions and will is one reason to engage the season of Lent; life confronts us with the need for courage, God asks that it be a broken-hearted courage. By that, I mean that we are asked to offer up everything, even our mortality for the greater good; we are encouraged to go out to face the new (and threatening) horizons of our day and culture without body armor and without hardness of heart. One writer says that if we love our neighbors as ourselves, it means we hope our neighbor gains everything we hope to gain – and we want them to have it first.

So, learning to trust in that kind of hope, in God's hope requires practice, the practice of Lent. As Paul Tillich wrote,

The human mind is not only, as Calvin has said, a permanent factory of idols, it is also a permanent factory of fears – the first in order to escape God, the second in order to escape anxiety; and there is a relationship between the two. For facing the God who is really God means facing also the absolute threat of nonbeing. ... for it is the extinction of every finite self-affirmation..." (Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, p. 39).

Systems and patterns of living are breaking down more quickly that we can build the new; Paul says to 'hold to the good,' but in a pinch any handhold will do.

We have been riding too long and too far on our survival instincts to let God to be God. Perhaps that is why it takes a crisis to draw nearer to the Savior. Joel's opening alarm, is really about human beings repeating the patterns we've established since Eden to keep ourselves safe: eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and equating that knowledge with power that allows us to define what is good and what is evil, thereby opening the door for Cain to kill Abel and set the pattern for eliminating those who seems to stand in our way. Biblical prophets are not fortunetellers in the way of Miss Cleo or Uri Geller, they speak for God who has constantly had to remind the human family of our responsibility for the trajectory of our actions so they speak to facing our fears rather than letting them run rampant in the streets.

Carla Herreria said,

I'm mad at myself for not being more heroic. Instead, I fought over a tractor and tried to take back power over how I should die. I feel foolish now, but at least I ended that morning with family and confirmed one thing I always knew to be true: I'd choose family over anything, even if it meant racing into uncertainty. But if I learned anything that day — in between the

race for survival, the love, the anger, the desperation — it's this: Be softer and love harder when the world ends. It's the only sane thing to do.

Preaching to the choir is an old saying that indicated a pastor expected agreement among the listeners – tonight, I thought I might literally be preaching only to the choir on this Ash Wednesday/Valentine's Day combo, but here you are. So here's our prophetic word – part of what happens on this day is a privatization of love and compassion; we pursue our own comforts and pleasures while trying not to know that others are suffering lives that are worse than death itself. The locusts of human trafficking, war, racism, sexism, heterosexism, a new nuclear race, poverty, and more are on the horizon and as a nation we are too busy, too overwhelmed, and too much in survival mode to fix them so fear and anxiety are driving the bus which means creativity and compassion are on the run. God addresses these through broken and contrite hearts.

As Tillich put it,

Love reunites that which is self-centered and individual. The power of love is not something which is added to an otherwise finished process, but life has love in itself as one of its constitutive elements. It is the fulfilment and the triumph of love that it is able to reunite the most radically separated beings, namely individual persons. The individual person is both most separated and the bearer of the most powerful love" (Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, p.26).

In some ways, we are in a long Lent – real safety and peace come with unity – the broadest unity we can create. This is our calling, how will you respond?