

The Hopeful Christian

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, October 24, 2004; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Joel 2:23-32

“O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, ...”

The end is near! At least that is what I was told while riding on the Subway the other day. I was sitting, working on this sermon, when another gentleman sitting behind me, leaned over, saw a few religious words scribbled down on a piece of paper, and began to strike up a “religious” conversation. Now usually I try to avoid these conversations, because they tend to lead towards one kind of religious fanaticism or another, but I relented and listened to a twenty minute tirade rebuking the current, fearless, “godless” generation, pointing out, with obvious scare tactics, the high degree of natural disasters, and impending wars. He returned to his first statement, claiming that the end is near. I knew I wasn’t going to get any work accomplished with my sermon on this train ride, and began to look for a way out of the conversation. It took all my strength to stay any argument with him, theologically, or to get off at an early stop just to end the conversation, and my 34th street stop did not arrive soon enough. With the squealing of the train brakes, I thanked him for a “delightful and provoking conversation,” and quickly found my way off the train.

While I do not buy into much of the theological rhetoric of rapture and end-times that the gentleman used to make his argument, I did begin to wonder, is the end really near? Have you ever found yourself wondering if the world is getting worse and worse, and the end may just be near? Such thoughts resounded in my head, and made me wonder about the future of our planet. It probably did not help that the passage from Joel was heavy on my mind at the time, for this is a passage about salvation, and the end. In Joel, the Israelites were suffering from a severe famine caused by an onslaught of locusts and other adverse weather conditions. The land was ravaged, the food supply was decimated, and they were beyond any kind of hope. At the time, if you were to look out your window, all you would see would be mile after mile of ruined fields covered with dust and insects. With such a reality and a grim future of starvation haunting you, you would wonder if the end were indeed near.

This was the Biblical picture that was on my mind, and my imagination ran away with me as I began to wonder if indeed the end is near. We have had a rash of natural disasters from hurricanes, to the slow awakening of Mt. St. Helens, and more floods than I am comfortable with, suggesting that natural fanaticisms of the movie *The Day After Tomorrow* may not be to far from the possible truth. We have seen mass murders in Sudan most recently and many other places of Biblical propitiations. The Middle East, specifically around Israel and Palestine, is still a powder keg waiting to go off, and there is a river of blood flowing through all of those countries for one reason or another. We have seen the ideas and luxuries of safety; security and peace of mind become rare commodities with threats of terrorist attacks, flu attacks, and everything else that the evening news warns us about looming in our conscious. The Biblical scholar, Walter Wink claims that the world and our very psyche are caught in a cycle of violence and denomination wearing away at our mental state. We are taught that might makes right, that violence is justified, and that any who are against us must be completely and thoroughly destroyed. Such violence

only breeds more violence, but it is a cycle that we are trapped in, with no hope of respite, and only the options seem to be by in.

We can see our hope for a future dashed and destroyed. How easy it is for one to read Joel 2:30-31 “I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes,” and to connect such a prediction to the reality of today. It is like we are looking at the landscape of the picture, *The Scream*, by Munch, dark, chaotic, and bleak. Maybe, maybe the end is indeed near.

And as we look around at the bleak landscape, as the weight of reality falls in around us, do you end up seeing yourself as the main figure in the angst ridden work of *The Scream*? Do you see yourself as an individual disfigured and contorted, with your hands on your face in an overt sign of distress? For our external world will effect the way we view ourselves – as I have seen with many inner-city children living in situations of poverty.

How many times have I had to work with adolescents who had such a self-esteem problem, and I wonder how many adults truly overcome it. Do you look at yourself as a barren landscape, a wasteland with no color, no hope? In a world that is torn by greed, violence, mistrust, and individualism – it is easy to find yourself feeling empty and void. In a culture that places little value on community and more value on consumerism it is easy to find yourself alone and isolated. We jump into the world, don't we, and try to keep up with our culture's pace, but the locusts of the world continue to drive our desires, continue to eat away at our sense of satisfaction and ease, and deepen our hunger for more and more. More stuff, more power, more anything so that we can fill our empty lives. This is the value of life that we are given by our culture, our society. The Hobbesian social contract to acquire and protect resources, the Darwinian drive to live well, and continue to live better drives our lifestyle, but it never ends. Our thirst will always

3

continue, and the famine of our lives will be constant, and in someone else's eyes or comparison we will always be in the slums. But we buy into the drive and try to obtain enough of the “right” things thinking that they will make us happy.

Can we ever reach that place where we are full in our lives? We can't buy a sense of fulfillment, we can't acquire a moral sense of fulfillment, and upon these realizations we notice that our inner landscape begins to match the outside landscape of the world, and we begin to feel stuck, trapped. Have you seen the movie, *American Beauty*? In the beginning of this movie, the main character played by Kevin Spacey is describing his life as a go-nowhere, no fulfillment, and no focus kind of life. In his own mind, he was already dead.

It is an existential angst, a wanting to truly live, to truly be free but not able to ever achieve such freedom. We look at the world, we look at ourselves, and all we see is a barren landscape, ravaged by famine and drought.

But there is hope.

The hope found in scripture tells us that God does not leave us for dead; God reaches down, and saves us. Look at the beginning of the passage from Joel read for today, “O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given you the early rain for your vindication...” Look at the central part of our faith – the cross. For upon the cross we see Christ offering us the rain of salvation. Upon the cross we see our suffering savior offering us a life without suffering. Upon the cross we see our Lord releasing us from the race for power, wealth, and perfection. And Christ comes off the cross and invites us into his community, into his church so that we can be made clean, so that we can feel the rain of forgiveness, and the barren landscape of our lives will be no more. In Joel, God is speaking to a beaten, broken people and saying, “Have hope, for the rain will fall again bringing life to you and yours.”

4

Through Christ we hear that same hope – “the rain will fall again in your life as you enter into mine.” Do you hear Christ calling you, pleading with you take his hand, and join his community? Will you reach out and join Christ on the cross? Will you confess that you cannot make it without his intervention, that he is Lord and Savior, and that through his sacrifice we find life? Will you reach out and become a part of his body, his holy fellowship? Here, among the holy union of believers, you will know that you are loved by God through Christ, and by the members of the church. Here you will know that your life can be full by someone loving you and you loving others. Here you will know that no matter how often you fall, no matter how often you fail you are always welcomed back into the loving arms of Christ. You don’t need possessions, you don’t need power, and all you need is the love of God through Christ. That is the rain that nourishes, that encourages true growth and that offers hope for life. Through Christ our drought is ended, our emptiness is filled, and we can live freely and fully. There is indeed a hope that can be found in the scriptures that God will not leave us for dead, but will reach down, and save us.

And then, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God will use us. Look at what it says in Joel, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, our old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.” Look at who will receive the spirit – everyone! This is not a religion of hierarchy. This is not about who is more spiritual than the other, who is called to what vocation, or who is closer to God. This is not about earning more religious stripes than others in the church, or placing some higher up on the religious ladder than others. No, this truly is a Baptist idea, this is the priesthood of all the believers, that all people will receive the Holy Spirit, no matter who, where, why, or how you have entered into the church. Christ doesn’t care where you came from, how much money you make, what your ethnic background may be, or how much you know, all are a part of God’s people and all will be

5

blessed with the Holy Spirit. God will call each one of you, God has a plan for each one of you, and God will fill each one of you with the Holy Spirit.

Now maybe you have already felt it, maybe you have already experienced it. Have you prophesied, have you dreamed your dreams, have you seen your visions? You will. So be careful, because when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then anything can happen, from dreams to vision, to prophecy. Have you ever heard the phrase, “Slain in the Spirit.”? It comes from our more Pentecostal brethren and it means that the Spirit takes hold of you, and you lose control. In 1801 at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, the Presbyterians, (of all people), had one of the largest revival gatherings, and people, filled with the Holy Spirit, turned to extreme outward showings of their inward experience (to the point of barking and rolling in the ground). It is a feeling of joy, of love, of excitement, and giving up control all at the same time, because you are full! In the classic movie *The Blues Brothers*, Jake and Elwood found themselves in a black Baptist church with James Brown preaching, and the Holy Spirit, jumping, dancing, and gaining a vision, a “mission from God”, captured them. In the process they started glowing with a blue light, but that was Hollywood’s influence. This is the experience I am talking about; the feeling of the Spirit stirring, moving, and pushing within you demanding a response. And we are connected with the divine, we are brought into God’s presence in a way that we could never, ever control, contort, or contrive. This is where the dreams, the visions, and prophecy come from. You have seen this before, or maybe you have experienced it. When someone gets that distant look in his or her eyes, and begins to talk about grandeur, they talk about “build it and they will come,” kind of ideas. This is the “mission” that the Blues Brothers received. Scholars like Hegel, Tilliarard de Chardin and Pannenberg consider the ways in which the Spirit is the calumination of time and history; the spirit pointed to the end. Only by the Holy Spirit will we be guided to that full promise and great future. Christ offers us his love, offers to fill our empty lives, and

6

invites us into the church. But once we are in, the Holy Spirit then seizes us, and then God will use us.

You see, I haven't forgotten the world, and certainly God hasn't either. For when we are seized by the Spirit, then we are sent out to change, to reform, to hearken creation to be that which God created it to be, to call people to live as God calls them to live, and to call the world into Christ's arms. We are to be the rain that falls on a barren land shedding hope, love, and joy to the empty of heart. We are the rain that falls on the land ravaged by drought, famine, and locust spreading seeds of God's acceptance and mercy. We are the rain that falls on the empty land destroyed by greed, power and hate, offering love, peace, and acceptance. But be ready! You need to be ready for anything when the Holy Spirit enters into your life. Look at the examples of scripture, the apostles at Pentecost, Peter on the rooftop, Paul on the road to Damascus, and on and on. This was the passage that Peter quoted in his sermon at Pentecost, claiming that it was only through the Spirit that such amazing things could happen.

The Holy Spirit is going to grab you and it is going to lead you. Can you see where it is that we are being led? We are being led to open the doors of this church into our community – not just to let people in, but also to let people out. For that is where God is leading us – out. Out into the world, to share the hope. Out into the world to share the love. Out into the world to share the good news that Jesus Christ loves us, died for us, and returns to call us into his family. This is nothing that we can do alone but only through the power, the guidance, the conviction of the Holy Spirit can we get up and get out into the world. Then we can feed the hungry with material food and spiritual nourishment. Then we can clothe the naked with coats, and with God's love. Then we can care for the sick with medicine, and with the healing grace of Christ. Then we can visit those in prison, and offer them the liberation of God's love through the cross. When the Spirit seizes us, when we are grabbed by our Advocate, the Holy Spirit, then we will be used to change the world in a way we could never do alone.

7

So are you ready? Are you ready to open those doors and go out into the world? Are you ready to come back next week, with stories of God's power, God's grace working in your lives and others. Are you ready to bring others into this church, into the body of Christ so that we can join together again, ask to be made whole, and then grabbed by the Holy Spirit so that we can go back again? For there will be a time when these doors will be open and the church will be full so that we will not know if people are going out or coming in any more. On that great Day of the Lord, the walls between the church and the world will be broken down and we will all in one voice, led by the Holy Spirit call upon the name of the Lord.

Come into the church. Accept the life that Jesus offers. Accept the power of the Holy Spirit in your life. And have a hope that the drought of the world, like the drought in all of our lives will not last long.

AMEN

8