Joel 2:23-28 (NRSVUE)

23 O children of Zion, be glad,
and rejoice in the Lord your God,
for he has given the early rain for your vindication;
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.
24 The threshing floors shall be full of grain;
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

25 I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army that I sent against you.

26 You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied
and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.
27 You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel
and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.

28Then afterward
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

Seeing the Vision

Over the past few weeks, we've been exploring what it means to be a steward. Rather appropriate for the end of the year, when we consider all that we have received from God, and how to glorify God through our stewardship of our church and our community. Zacchaeus taught us in the Gospel of Luke that stewardship is an understanding of wealth as a blessing of the community, not just the individual. The Apostle Paul taught us in his epistle to the Romans that stewardship is an act of love, a debt that is paid out each day in our walk with Christ. And this morning, we reach a critical point in our stewardship journey here with the prophet Joel.

I admit, this is perhaps the least tangible link to stewardship that we've discussed so far. It's interesting that Joel says nothing about giving, or receiving, really, in this passage. Why,

then, did you pick this passage to talk about stewardship, Pastor Andrew? I asked myself the same question this week. But Joel says a lot in just three short chapters. This morning we read about a third of the second chapter of Joel, and in his words, we might find… some truth? Perhaps there's something we can relate to in this morning's lection. When the prophet Joel talks about hope and vision, and dreaming in the face of tragedy, I think that we find a great deal of fuel for the fire that burns in our hearts, about caring for the things around us that we love. Let's talk about that.

Would you please pray with me? …

Joel is a prophet, just like what we've explored before with others like Jeremiah. To refresh your memory a bit, let's remember that a prophet is someone who speaks of the future by reading the present times. They tell people of what is to come based on their knowledge of God and on the actions of the people and the goings on in the world around them. This is often spoken of along the lines of prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Hosea, who come to speak to the ways that Israel has strayed from the path of righteousness. In times of inequality, these prophets speak to the judgment of God and how the people sinned. Interestingly, though, Joel is one of the prophets who preaches salvation in a present time of desolation. Unlike some of the other prophets, Joel speaks of a past and present that look bleak, and a future that looks bright. In a time of destruction and despair, Joel preaches hope.

You see, before all of this, before the words of Joel that are written in our Bibles, there has been a plague: a violent invasion of locusts. An entire livelihood has been laid waste by such creatures, and the lands have been almost scorched from their destruction. We can picture the aftermath of wildfires, or tornadoes, as we've seen in recent years in our own country. But, amidst the wreckage, Joel stands with his people—the people of God—in the wreckage, before he even recites the promises that we've read this morning.

Joel actually begins his speech, back in chapter 1 of Joel, with a proclamation that probably rang true for people at the time. He says, "a nation has invaded my land, powerful and innumerable … (and) it has laid waste my vines and splintered my fig trees."[1] He tells the farmers to "be dismayed … (over) the crops of the field," and assures his listeners that "joy withers away" among them.[2] And Joel moved into calls to perhaps repent, to make offerings to God, and to otherwise remain faithful to God, even in the face of such difficulty.

Notice some key points here. Even though the entire first chapter and a half are urging people to repent and give offerings to God, neither Joel nor God mentions a particular sin. Even though there is a call to repent, nowhere does Joel blame the people. Nowhere, does God blame the people. Though they are called to repent and give offerings to the Lord, this is not as recompense for what has been done. Rather, they are called to remain with God. For Joel goes on to say that all creatures, even the wild animals, cry to God, because "the waters are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness."[3] Again, all of creation is lamenting, and lament is the language of truth. This is their reality.

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[1] Joel 1:6-7.
[2] Joel 1:11-12.
[3] Joel 1:20.

And so, Joel continues to say, of course people must be sad. They must be scared, they must feel confused and betrayed, because bad things have been happening. And yet, God says, God will fill their coffers and replenish their fields once more. They will live in abundance again, not because of their faith or because they led particularly great lives, or because they repented of any great sin, but because they love God and because God loves them. God will pay them back for what they've lost. And while this might not happen *immediately*, it will come to pass. There's an implication in that, just as the locust plague—and the loss that came with it—was an unexpected change in their plans, so too might be the replenishing. God says that we can't plan on things always going the way we want them to, but we also can't plan on things remaining the same. Be they good or bad, as the rock mega-group Journey writes, "the wheel in the sky keeps on turning,"[4] and we don't know exactly where we'll be tomorrow.

God, through Joel, is speaking of structuring our plans alongside those of God, remaining faithful to God and to our stated mission, whatever that is, in our planning. Joel speaks of trusting in the work of the Spirit moving in us, not *instead* of making plans, but *as* we make plans.

So, our passage begins with a message of abundance, in the face of a present time of struggle and scarcity. It ends with a promise of the Spirit of God being poured out on all flesh. So the theme of abundance continues, not just for material goods, or peoples' livelihoods, but there is a sense of continued and renewed spiritual fulfilment and sharing. Not only will we be spiritually filled, but we will be poured out with the spirit.

I'm normally one to just jump ahead, but let's go ahead and say the quiet part out loud. God has indeed poured out the spirit on all flesh. We know this by our baptism, by Pentecost, by the coming of Christ and the ensuing Kingdom of God on earth. All of us, therefore, have the capacity to dream dreams and see visions. We do so today, and every day, when we show up to church. We come to church not because things are great in our lives and in the world—although, if you feel that they are, that's great. I'm saying, though, that we don't worship because we expect a reward. We worship God because we believe in the mission and vision that we have cocreated with God, by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Stewardship, in light of this scripture, is trusting in the Spirit. It's dreaming the dream, it's seeing the vision. It's trusting that the kingdom of God is at hand, and working to bring it about. It isn't blind trust in the future without a plan, nor is it holding on to things until the way is completely clear and free of obstacles. There's a middle ground that God calls us into as stewards of the church, as followers of Christ, that as good stewards, we inhabit. We absolutely must trust in the work of the Spirit. But we cannot *only* trust in the Holy Spirit. While the Spirit is at work, that manifests in our own visioning and dreaming, that we share with one another.

Remember what God says to the people facing despair and desolation in the text: God is in the midst of Israel. God is with the people in Israel, just as God is with us now. Israel will return to its land. Restoration is in the offing, and the prophetic vision of a return is the vision of the Return from Exile.

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[4] Journey, "Wheel in the Sky", in all of its '70s glory.

Even though this passage is perhaps the least explicitly tied to stewardship that we've read so far, it does provide an important truth in the goodness of God. In particular, it provides a critical notion about the Holy Spirit.

Two things are true about the spirit, according to Joel. Firstly, as we find in the first half of our reading, God is with us in times of abundance and in times of struggle, as individuals and as the church. God remains with us, and carries us through all times. In a culture and time like ours, marked by fear of scarcity, it's difficult to live lives that are free of anxiety about the future. When faced with realities like ours, in the face of things like food scarcity, or grocery prices, or housing insecurity, it's difficult to imagine what next month will look like, let alone next year. I can certainly attest to that anxiety. And it's difficult to shake. But although we may be anxious about the future, we can live freely, hopefully, and generously because we know that God has promised to care for us until our needs, and the world's, are fully satisfied. This is the promise that God makes to Joel, to the people of Israel, and to us: that God will remain with us, and that God will provide. There will be hard times, sure. We may even feel like we're in hard times now. But God is still with us.

The second truth that Joel tells us is in the last two verses of our reading this morning. God's spirit is poured out on all flesh. Note the plurality in the language: "your sons and daughters," all, "will prophesy. Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams." The passage in Joel doesn't stop there. It continues, saying "even on the male and female slaves, … I will pour out my spirit."[5]

It was a common construction in biblical Hebrew to give two opposing things and give them together, implying the range of things that come between. We see this in Genesis 1:1, "When God created"[6] or "began to create the heavens and the earth…"[7] and the implication being that God made everything in between, as well. We see this same construction here. Not just the old men, but the young ones, too, and everyone in between. Not just free citizens and the wealthy, but the enslaved people and the servants, and everyone in between. Not only is it the rich, the people with power, but *all* people in the community, from the top to the bottom, will receive the spirit of the Lord, and with it, the visions for where we are being led. Joel goes on to say that "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."[8] This is the power of the Holy Spirit, unfettered by considerations of gender, age, or social rank. Not only is it poured out on everyone, but God's loving kindness is available for all, in ways that we might not anticipate.

This is good news for all who might think ourselves unqualified, somehow, to participate in the Kingdom of God. The spirit of the Lord has been poured out upon us all. All of us have been given the power, ability, and purpose to dream dreams and see visions. When we take these two points together, we learn something new: because God is always with us, and because we have God's spirit which allows us to dream dreams and see visions, we can make plans for ourselves and our communities by being open to the Spirit within and around us. We are, all of

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[5] Joel 2:29.
[6] NRSV.
[7] NRSVUE.
[8] Joel 2:32.

us, empowered to envision for ourselves, together with God, the future of our church and of our world.

This is an immense privilege, and a blessing. The ability to gather together and fashion new ways of being, of doing, and of serving God and one another is an incredible gift. It's a powerful spiritual act. With great power, of course, comes great responsibility. When we offer of ourselves to our communities, we ought not to do so with no plan. We need to work together to ensure that our tithes, time, and talents go to places and things that we care about, that we believe will truly help continue our mission and vision. We can't go forward with no plan, but we also can't withhold, or sit idly by, while we wait for something else to happen. Even though we read, and we know, that God will provide for us, there is still an active quality in our provisions. God has poured God's spirit out upon us. Thus, we have the agency, we have the responsibility, to envision how we will grow, and then take steps towards that growth.

Ultimately, I would say, then, good stewardship is done according to the visions that God has shown us. It's done according to the dreams that we dream about the world, as a direct result of the spirit being poured out upon us. It's done in response to the abundance that God has promised us, and in response to the presence of the God who is with us.

Now, faced with all of these things, what does stewardship look like here? What does it look like to see the vision of God in this church? What does it look like in today's world? I always end with questions. I think the answer is a bit clearer, though: today, in this church, stewardship is the giving of what we can, in response to the faithfulness that God has for us, and that we have for God. It's the responsible visioning of the future, actively and earnestly, together. It's looking ahead with excitement for what may be, and knowing that even if our plans change, they change with God's spirit upon us. It's being certain that God remains with us, throughout all things, and continues to reconcile us to one another, and to the heavens, in new and exciting ways. Let's remember that the people of Israel had to change their plans. So too, must we be flexible and adaptable in our planning, in our visions and our dreams, and in our stewardship.

It lives and breathes alongside us, as our understanding of God and of our community changes. I would go so far as to say that that's the work of the Spirit, too. We are made co-creators of our communities, along with God, and we shape them as we ourselves are formed. As such, in our stewardship of the church—the building, our community, our mission and work in the world—we have a duty to participate in that creation responsibly. Again, this means both having a vision, a dream, and trusting that the Spirit will continue to move upon, within, and around us.

Next Sunday, we will begin to officially pledge our tithes for the next year. We also will celebrate the reign of Christ as the King of Kings, and prepare for the arrival of the newborn Jesus in Advent. That's a lot going on. And in those goings on, there's a lot of transition and change. But I know that through all of the change, there are some things that remain the same. God loves us, God stands with us in times of abundance and strife, and God gives us the opportunity to re-vision the way forward, as one body in Christ, alongside God. As we pray each Sunday, let the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the works of our hands be

pleasing to God. May the mission of the church bring about life on earth, as it is in heaven. May it be so. Amen.