

Inspiration

Menno Mennonite Church
October 23, 2022

Purpose: To celebrate God's connecting, inspiring Spirit that is with us all.

Message: Even when we feel ourselves most baren, God promises that the Spirit will restore us.

Scripture: Joel 2:23-32 [I will read]; Complementary reading: Psalm 27

Synopsis: There is much to be said about being in the Spirit. Right and wrong the spirit of a moment can sweep us along with the tide of emotion and reality in ways that can be unpredictable. Joel's words come after much diagnosis of Israel that leaves little to the imagination. Devastated by famine and plague (locusts in this case) they are being promised not only restoration of what had been, but a level of life that was here-to-fore unknown. It is here that the vision of God's Spirit flowing out in new ways not to the chosen few but to all God's people is given, words that are later proved true at Pentecost. How might we better appreciate the flowing of the Spirit in our midst? Where could we anticipate the years being repaid in full?

<https://www.evernote.com/shard/s249/u/0/sh/3d1f148f-19ac-4fca-8df2-d3fa94d70866/73b6c7d5259c22ff594d17e166326ee5>

Joel 2:23-32

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, which 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.

²⁸ Then 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.

²⁹ Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

³⁰ I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke.

³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness,
and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.

³² Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved;
for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape,
as the LORD has said,
and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

For all the credence we give to being rational, modern thinkers, we certainly give a broad attention to the notion of Spirit. So much so, that we take the word with only the slightest of sincerity, or that it has a whole lot of meaning left it. We are in the moment where we are invited, implored to get into the holiday spirit, first into Halloween by provisioning candy and good will, then thanksgiving and Christmas and on it goes. We are given School Spirit where we wear the right colors and participate in the right way in order to be part of something bigger. We have the invocation of community spirit and doing the right thing by the community in the name of getting into something bigger than ourselves. No one means much by it—it is the stuff you do when you are part of a community, a school, or the calendar demands that we take on the aspect of one of the proper mode and attitude as is fitting the occasion. We don't know what we really mean by it, but we know what we do when we take on the task. Our notion of Spiritual has not fared much better. Spirituality remains a self defined and self regulated affair that can have meaning for someone in what ever way that it takes is import. It can mean anything from a traditionally pious person of faith to someone who consults their crystals and their vibrations in the process of selecting their outfit for the moment. For all its widespread and well marketed popularity, I am not sure that we know what we actually mean by Spirituality in general conversation. At least there needs to be some work at defining terms straight away.

But for all that, we know that for all it somewhat insubstantial, vaporous reputation, we know that getting caught up in the Spirit has realistic and consequential impacts. We get into the vibe of the place and what is going on and can be swept along the way more easily than what we are given to. I think that was something I missed in the isolation of the pandemic—just the exposure to other people and the meaning that can come from that. Going along with the mood of the crowd has been the excuse for behavior from joining a silly cheer, to the drunken vandalism that follows a celebration of a championship game, never mind whether the team actual won or lost (the riot because we won has never made a whole lot sense for me—kinda like if you are happy and you know it burn a car). The spirit, when it moves, is a powerful thing, even when we don't know well how to define it. That movement will take us places we least know to expect.

Joel is one of those prophets who you know, but not in the way that you thought you know him. Really, we know this reading not because we spend a whole lot of time with Joel, his diagnosis of the issues of the day of the Lord that he spends most of the short book describing in

graphic and demanding detail. Rather it is the citation of Joel by Peter in the story of Pentecost in Acts 2 proclaiming this vision in completion then to speaking to the healing of the wounds of exile and alienation that Joel offers directly. Given that we don't know much about Joel—his possible dating ranges anywhere between 900 to 300 BC with different ways of thinking about what he is saying and why—there is little surprise that it is this pronouncement of the Spirit that is the part that stands out. After proclaiming the desolation of the land, observing devastation of pestilence, disease, famine and all the rest, he turns then to this articulation of the working of the Spirit in the people that will not only restore what has been lost, says Joel, but will build on it far beyond the expectations of the people of Judah.

For all his obscurity, there is much here to anticipate, and even more to trust. In the history of God's people there have been outpourings of the Spirit. Think Moses and Aaron, those who worked power in the past. But it has always been specific people at times and places that required it. The Spirit rested on the anointed where it could be properly set aside and wielded for the people. The King was said to possess the Spirit of God; the Prophets was where it was to reside. Israel was not a divine democracy but a theocracy in which God did the choosing in terms of who would be important enough to receive an anointing and who would not.

But then comes Joel 2 and a stunning message that points to what you could almost call the democratizing of God's Spirit: it was one day going to come to just about everybody without distinction. Is there little wonder it stuck in Peter's mind when presented with Pentecost? Not only would the Spirit flow, it would flow out with abundance and completion. In Jeremiah the prophet proclaims in his book of consolation that it would no longer be necessary for neighbors to tell each other to "know the Lord" because everyone would be comfortable with the ways of YHWH God. Here Joel takes up this notion promising that the day would come when it would no longer be needed to find the anointed one with whom the Spirit lodges because everyone of God's people was to be so anointed. Young and old, boys and girls, men and women, the likely and the unlikely: everybody was going to have a Spirit descend on them that would open up visions and dreams and ways of understanding God and God's kingdom that had simply not been available on the popular level at any prior time. Everyone would see the great wonders God would work on the earth and in the heavens and they would understand what was what and who was who in the grander scheme of things. That is the promise of restoration, of new life where

ever life would have seemed to have passed by. The wind of the Spirit blows where it will and will bring new life even where it is least expected.

Yet, if the Spirit of God is poured out on us like Oxygen—just as essential and life giving, yet plentiful enough to be taken for granted that it is always just there and present—so to is our life in the Spirit subject to the notions of “out of sight and out of mind.” We are living Joel’s vision of the Spirit outpoured yet we can struggle to name its presence and power in our lives. If you want to note your breathing most days, it is a discipline to stop long enough and quietly enough to clear the head space to recognize your breath. The same is true with the Spirit. Fortunately enough we as Christians of Pentecost need not worry about *whether* the Spirit is abroad. We might wonder at the ways that the gifts are distributed, and compare notes and worry that just because we don’t have the Spirit manifest in this way or the next then we don’t have the Spirit. We now live lives immersed in and enveloped by God’s Spirit and we can trust that. Yet our nights are not typically filled with the dreams of that which we know to be God inspired, nor our days with the visions of God’s will in the world, it can be easy to miss how much we are indeed part of the Spirit, or wonder how it works at all. We cannot know—and thankfully neither do we have to experience—what life would be like without God’s Spirit. We mostly are unaware of the gifts, the insights, the abilities we have to do our jobs in the kingdom that are provided by the Spirit alone.

I began this sermon waxing philosophical on the ways and meaning of spirit and the indefinite influence it can have on our lives. Yet I think we must take it seriously to consider the power of the Spirit that is in our midst.

Have you ever tried to sit out a wave. Not the tides on the shore—that’s a whole other thing—but the habit of large crowds to do silly things together. It starts small with a group or a row trying to get something rolling. It keeps spreading and spreading until the cascade of standing and whooping is making its way through the thousands. Sure you can sit out a round or two, and make yourself small, but sooner or later the spirit of the thing finds you and you too have to at least go with the flow, stand and cheer right along with everyone else. It takes some doing to stand against it and at the very least you are at least going to be laughing along even if you do not stand with everyone else. There is power in the crowd, and there is power in being buoyed along by the intent of the crowd, even if you might not be fully into it at that very moment.

In a certain respect, that is what we too do with each other. We provide the context for the outpouring of the Spirit. We bring each other along into the gifts of the Spirit and are mindful by the moving of the Spirit every bit as much as a body gathered as we ever are as individuals bearing responsibility for our own Spiritual discernment. At our best we encourage each other in hope and in presence, speaking of what we see and value, calling out what we see needed and where. While we can squash gifts and silence voices we might not be ready to hear—the body is subject to collective human frailty even as much as it is collective Spiritual mindedness—we also can inspire and sustain without our even being aware of it. It is the breathing together that we do.

The Spirit is come, and the Spirit is among us in many ways and to many ends. We owe it to each other to breath deeply the sustaining hope of God, and to know the working of the Spirit that flows through us all.

May we know move and move others knowing that God's spirit flows through us each, for these are not days long foretold, but are here and now with the enlivening hope of the Spirit. May we move always as the restoring work of God commences.

Amen.