

Thanksgiving 2006 Sermon

By Denise Clapsaddle

Sermon Text: Joel 2:21-27

Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. 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. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. 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. 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. 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.

Two summers ago, I did the most humbling thing ever--I planted a garden. After years of apartment living, my husband and I bought a house with a tiny yard. That first spring, we started seeds in pots on windowsills. When the weather turned we took the pots outside, and chipmunks ate our tiny plants. Somehow, we got some seedlings into the ground, and in a few weeks, we started to think about nature in a new way. Dirt became more than just something to scrape off our shoes before entering the house. Patterns of sun and shade in our yard taught us that landscaping is more than decorating. You can't just put a spray of flowers where you think it will look good, the way you place a painting. It all made us feel a little small. That first summer our garden produced four squash, and I have never eaten squash the same way since.

Joel would find our ignorance about the natural world stunning. His people, the Hebrew people, live close to the land. Joel knows, probably from painful personal experience, how humbling it can be to work the land and depend upon it for survival, how it can drive someone to tears and to prayer again and again. When your food comes from a supermarket, when you have never really known hunger, you have no idea how fragile the plants and animals that supply our food are. For the most part, we consider ourselves above nature, not part of it. God sees things differently. "Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield." This scripture is addressed to all of creation, not just people. God sees creation as a glorious end unto itself, not merely a means to an end for humanity.

We church folk generally describe our relationship to nature as "stewardship." There is some merit to this view. Humans alone are created in the image of God and understand how to protect creation. Understanding something and doing it are two different things, unfortunately. To be fair, only in the past several generations have people become numerous and technologically advanced enough to have much of an impact on nature, positive or negative.

We may think that the ancient texts of the Bible have little to say about what it means to confront global warming and the nuclear threat, but while the environmental problems facing humanity

have changed, people have not changed much. When we grasp all that must be done to preserve creation for future generations, it can overwhelm us. Joel speaks to people like us, people weary of environmental problems, people sometimes overwhelmed by them. Joel refers to past environmental disasters: "years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter. Speaking for God, Joel calls these threats "my great army, which I sent against you." These poor people have been waging a war on bugs that feels hopeless.

Sometimes when I start my car, it confounds me that this act helps change the climate in scary ways. On a purely human level, I understand climate change skeptics. Most people aren't familiar with the powerful evidence supporting climate change and the flimsiness of arguments against it. Skepticism about climate change, and the reluctance of world leaders to solve the problems it causes, makes me feel the way Joel must have felt in the face of those bugs--angry and helpless because something as small as a grasshopper or a single gas engine, multiplied by millions, can cause such destruction.

This feeling of being overwhelmed and helpless is exactly what God needs us to release. "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. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter... You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you." The Hebrew word translated here as "vindication" is *tsedeqa*, -God's saving justice or justice-love, a key concept in the Hebrew scripture. God's justice is inseparable from God's love. God is a God of justice: not just justice for us, but for all creation; not just justice for our time, but justice for all time. God is able to make works of saving justice happen. It does not matter whether the instrument of God's justice is an early rain, or a congregation that arranges for an energy audit of the church building in order to conserve more natural resources.

A few months ago, my husband called me from work. "I bought a bamboo composter," he announced excitedly. "Actually, I bought two of them."

"Two of them?" I said.

"You need to rotate the compost," he explained.

"Oh." I said.

"This will do wonders for our composting," he continued.

I sighed, but said nothing. For the first couple of years of our garden, "our composting" consisted mainly of my husband periodically Googling the word "compost," while we used commercial organic fertilizer on the garden. I figured his buying compost bins would be like when people make a New Years Resolution to exercise and buy an exercise bike, which then just sits in the corner gathering dust. Anyway, the bamboo composters arrived.

I was unimpressed.

"It's just a bunch of bamboo poles strung together," I said. "It's like a sieve."

"That's to allow for ventilation," my husband explained.

"Oh," I said. The composters sat on our deck for weeks in their original packaging. Finally, I nudged him into setting them up. Two months later, they are both about half-full. When I compost my vegetable scraps it amazes me that all this waste that would have gone into a landfill is being transformed into useful fertilizer.

"Next year we are going to have the best garden ever," My husband tells me, and it reminds me of something that we all need to be reminded of regularly--that hope is contagious. I'm not a naturally hopeful person. Sometimes, being hopeful makes me feel like a patsy, like one of those people who falls for mail-order scams. The truth is, though, if you scratch off my crusty, cynical exterior, you find out it is quite a flimsy thing, and underneath I'm a big, squishy softy hoping to be shaken out of my cynicism and given a reason to hope. My husband, more often than not, trusts God will take care of us in the future just as God has taken care of us so far. My husband, if you haven't guessed, is a lay person, and I am clergy. When he starts talking about how God works and moves in our world and takes care of us, it just infuriates me. The truth is, though, we *are* blessed, but most of us don't understand the nature of that blessing most of the time. We are blessed with the ability to care. We are blessed with the ability to make a difference. We are blessed with the word of God that moves us from complacency to action. The conclusion is inescapable--by causing a pile of food scraps to decompose in our backyard, we are blessed to act as instruments of God's saving justice.

At the end of this passage of scripture, Joel tells us that God promises, "my people shall never again be put to shame." The Hebrew word translated as shame is *boosh*, which can also mean being confounded, confused, dejected or anxious. We are living in an age of anxiety. This not-knowing-how-to-feel, this confusion about what it means to be called to work for God's saving justice in a time of encroaching threats to creation is not a new experience. But even in the face of huge environmental challenges, there are reasons to hope. In the 1970s there was a TV commercial about pollution featuring an actor playing a native American. "People start pollution," the voiceover said, as a tear rolled down the old man's face. "People can stop it." We cleaned up our highways because we became aware they needed cleaning up. Awareness is the beginning of justice. When I first learned about greenhouse gases threatening to re-make the climate of the natural world, I wanted to un-learn it. I wanted to go back to a state of ignorance. I no longer feel that way. Sometimes, God's justice happens to us. Sometimes, we are called to be instruments of God's justice. When that happens, we are blessed.