Ash Wednesday

March 2, 2022

Text: Joel 2:12-19

*“Normal or New?“*

 Last year in Lent, when I teamed up with three of the pastors of the Circuit to provide Lent services online, our theme was “COVID Captivity”. We compared our situation during the pandemic, in which we were unable to gather for worship together, with the plight of the ancient exiles of Judah. Their lives were turned upside down by the invasion and destruction of their nation by Babylonian forces. At the time, I recall longing for an end to pandemic and its restrictions, a deep desire for life to return to what it had been – “normal.” It seemed that that must have been similar to what the exiles of old felt as they struggled to find their way living in a strange place among strange people. Some the psalms show us that they too longed to a return to their land and to the life they had once considered “normal.”

 During this past year, our world has seen two more COVID variants, the distribution of a cadre of vaccines, and a long parade of natural disasters around the world, thought to be the result of climate change. Here in Canada, we just witnessed as a series of blockades to protest pandemic restrictions upset life and commerce for nearly a month that finally moved governments and police to take extraordinary action. Last week, Russia invaded Ukraine without provocation, and its armies continue to move on a deadly and destructive path towards Kyiv, while Western nations isolate Russia with waves of punishing economic sanctions, hoping to turn the Russian people against its seemingly mad leader. Can anyone really remember what “normal life” was like?

 God may be calling us to put aside those precious memories, so that we can respond more appropriately to our present crises. In Joel’s time, Israel was struck by a monstrous invasion, a plague of locusts overran the countryside. These voracious creatures devoured everything in their path. Farmlands were reduced to fields of dirt. Trees were left winter bare. Even in towns and cities the locusts advanced in search of whatever they could eat.

 God called Joel to serve as His prophet, to interpret for His people the meaning of the disaster. Comparing the locusts to a relentless, marauding army, Joel taught his Israelite neighbours to discern God’s judgement in this harrowing event. Joel did not identify any sin or sins in particular that corrupted the nation of Israel at that time. Yet he still instructed the people to respond to the crisis with humility. *“Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.”* We are the people of God in Jesus Christ. We humbly confess that we, with the rest of humanity, are sinful and deserve nothing but God’s judgment for our sins. We do not deserve the prosperous “normal” life that we might recall. Earthly well being in all its aspects is God’s gift to give to His creatures, and He gives it freely to all, even to those who do not believe in Him or honor Him. When we enjoyed it, did we thank God with all our hearts for His blessings? When we chaff under these present hardships, do we not mistake God’s gifts of peace, security, freedom, health, and economic prosperity for our birthrights in life?

We must heed Joel’s cry. Through Him God calls: “Stop your complaints and protests, let go of your nostalgic longing for better days, and bring all of your fears, your worries, for yourselves and for this world to me. Call upon me in these days of trouble. I am the God who blessed you in days past, and I am the One who remains with you now. Do your sins weigh you down? There is forgiveness with me.”

 God is *“gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”* Because of God’s great love for us, our sins do not condemn us, for in His love, God sent His Son, Jesus, to die in the place of us sinners, and to rise from the dead with healing in His wings for all who trust in His mercy. For the sake of Jesus, God does not treat us as our sins deserve. Instead He forgives us and gives us His promise of eternal salvation. He calls us His children, and through us He makes His mercy known to the people of this world.

 Luke tells us of time when Jesus was asked for a response to a grievous act of injustice perpetrated by the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. The Lord surprised His hearers with His answer. He neither sided with the victimized Galileans, nor did He interpret their suffering as punishment from God. Instead He taught the people that such events called faithful people to repent of their own sins and rely upon the mercy of God alone for their salvation (Luke 13).

 In these troubled days, Lent has arrived just in time. It brings us God’s message that restores us to repentance and faith before Him that makes us strong to serve our neighbours who are troubled with us. We may never know “normal” again: that is God’s choice. But our Merciful God has already given us what this world can neither give nor take from us: perfect peace with God received through repentance from sin and trust in Jesus Christ our Saviour. Rest in Jesus’ promise: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”* (John 14:27)

 The peace of our Lord is greater than the tribulations of this life. Jesus gives us courage to speak and act in ways that demonstrate to our neighbours that God is our true refuge, strength and ever present help. Through wars, plagues, natural disasters and other troubles God calls His fallen creatures to repent of believing in themselves and look to Him for mercy. They, through unbelief and all the spiritual darkness that surrounds them, may not be able to recognize His voice. They angrily protest and demand better things for themselves. They boast that earthly blessings come to them through their efforts and wisdom alone. They broadcast lies to justify their lust for power and property. We who have been given ears to hear God’s voice must respond by praying to confess our own sins and those of our neighbours in hope of that God may mercifully relent of His punishment and open the eyes and hearts of those blinded by sin. Likewise, we pray for the Holy Spirit to help us and the whole Christian Church on earth to witness to our neighbours that God calls the world to repent of sin with us. Jesus lived, He died, and He is risen from the dead to save us from the judgement we deserve. He does not promise us a return to “normal.” He promises to make all of creation anew. When He returns, “normal” will pass away along with these heavens and earth and be transformed as the new heavens and earth, the eternal life given to us by God through Jesus His Son.

 Let us pray then throughout this season of Lent, not for a return to normalcy, but for the coming of God’s kingdom, as the Holy Spirit leads us to live godly lives of faith, love and hope, and finally when our Lord comes in glory to wipe away the tears from all faces. Amen.