

Joel: Hear Our Cry
Sermon 5-5-19
Pastor Curtis Dehmey

Joel 1:1-14

The word of the LORD that came to Joel son of Pethuel: ²Hear this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors? ³Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation. ⁴What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. ⁵Wake up, you drunkards, and weep; and wail, all you wine-drinkers, over the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. ⁶For a nation has invaded my land, powerful and innumerable; its teeth are lions' teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. ⁷It has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches have turned white.

⁸Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth for the husband of her youth. ⁹The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD. ¹⁰The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails. ¹¹Be dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vinedressers, over the wheat and the barley; for the crops of the field are ruined. ¹²The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, palm, and apple— all the trees of the field are dried up; surely, joy withers away among the people. ¹³Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. Come, pass the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God! Grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.

¹⁴Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.

Message:

(Play video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQLazbgz90c&t=144s>)
Joel is recalling a difficult time for the Israelites. It's a reflection of sorts. The day of the Lord has come upon them. ²"Hear this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors?" So Joel is drawing the Israelites attention to what happened to their ancestors and is implying that what happened to their ancestors has happened in their days. ³"Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation. ⁴What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust

has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.” Everything has been devoured. There is nothing left. No seed to replant. No sense of renewal coming. The irony in this part is that Joel is saying that the very plague, the 8th plague, that God used to save their ancestors in Egypt, is the very plague that He has sent upon them. God is against them. Every good thing, every rich pleasure, everything that was once life-giving, God has devoured with locusts. In other words, Joel is referring to the Babylonian Empire. God has decimated His people for their sin through the Babylonian Empire. God is on the side of the Babylonian Empire because of Israelites sin. God has beaten them into the ground. There is no life among them. They might be living, but they’re the walking dead.

When we have been so traumatized, defeated, decimated, and distraught, we tend to do some uncharacteristic things. We tend to seek things that numb the pain because it is too much to bear. Maybe we go on a shopping spree. Maybe we eat until it feels like our stomachs are going to explode. In the case of the Israelites, they feel so distraught and at a loss for words, that they choose escapes that some of us may also choose. “⁵Wake up, you drunkards, and weep; and wail, all you wine-drinkers, over the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth.” The people have chosen the escapism of drunkenness and drinking to numb the reality that their nation is dead. They have been defeated. Joel is saying, “Wake up! Stop numbing your pain! Stop running away from the devastation of your reality! Weep! Wail! Cry before the Lord your God! Hello!?!? Is anyone there?” “⁶For a nation [the Babylonians] has invaded MY land, powerful and innumerable; its teeth are lions’ teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. ⁷It has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches have turned white.” MY nation that was once teeming with life, growing branches, has grown old. It has splintered. The tree of life we once knew has been stripped of all dignity and is dying.

What does Joel call the people to? Lament! In a spiritual disciplines book by Adele Ahleberg Calhoun, she calls us to a spiritual discipline of praying lament. She says, “Sometimes the best response to the brokenness of this world and my own life is a mixture of tears and prayers. Something about them puts us in solidarity with human misery. At the end of our resources we seem wired to weep and cry ‘help.’ In fact, research on tears confirms that they wash away toxins and release endorphins that help restore psychological balance. Tears and prayers of lament won’t solve the problem of suffering, but they can stanch the raw nerve of pain by throwing us into the arms of God.” So Joel says, “⁸Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth for the husband of her youth.” What is sackcloth? In ancient Israel sackcloth had two meanings: grief and repentance. Joel means both, but let’s stick with the grief portion. Why does Joel tell a virgin to put on sackcloth “...for

the husband of her youth.” I believe what Joel is saying here is that it is time to mourn what could have been, but may not have happened due to the state of affairs. The trauma and disruption we’ve experienced. It reminds me of one of the most difficult situations I encountered as a chaplain. This didn’t happen very often, but every so often a woman had to give birth to a child that was expected to die within hours of birth. This was called a “fetal demise.” Occasionally, I would get called in to minister to the couple. What was unique about this experience and most challenging about this experience compared to other death scenarios was that they weren’t grieving all the memories they had with this child because they didn’t have any yet. When an elderly person was on their death bed, the family could grieve all the memories they had. In the case of a fetal demise, the parents were grieving what could have been, but will never happen. Dreams that they had for this child. Dreams that were grand. Moments that they were hoping would be full of joy are now gone in a flash. I believe that’s what Joel is saying here, grieve what could have been for your children, for your potential spouse, for the potential prosperity of Israel because it is no longer a future reality.

“⁹The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD.” Not only has a nation been decimated, but they can’t offer worship to the Lord. “⁹The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD.” They literally can’t do this because the fields have been destroyed and the vines that produced grapes, juice and wine are dead. In their understanding of God, they are literally cut-off from God. And Joel is saying that their actions have produced this result. Their sin and ignorance of their sin has produced this result. “The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD. [They can’t aid their people because they have nothing to offer God.] ¹⁰The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails. ¹¹Be dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vinedressers, over the wheat and the barley; for the crops of the field are ruined. ¹²The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, palm, and apple— all the trees of the field are dried up; surely, joy withers away among the people.” If you’re not dismayed by what has happened, you should be. You should be upset. You should be angry. You should be devastated. Even “the ground mourns.” Creation mourns it’s devastation.

What does he call us to do again? Lament. “¹³Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. Come, pass the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God! Grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. ¹⁴Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.” Joel calls me out, a minister of the Lord. He calls people like me out, spiritual leaders of the people to grieve and to lament the loss we’ve experienced. AND he calls out the elders to do the same. So, John, Dave and Steve, Joel is

calling you to lead the way in this lament. You're all elders of this church. And the role of elder is not just to lead us organizationally. You've done a great job at that. Joel/God is calling you to lead Providence Church spiritually as well. If you can only lead us organizationally, then you shouldn't be an elder. Your spiritual leadership is more important than your organizational leadership. Again, if you can't do that, then you shouldn't be an elder of this church. Joel/God is calling you to cry out to the Lord.

Far too often the church, at large, has fallen into this popular culture belief that God accepts us as we are and never judges us. We call it the love and the grace of God. This is 'cheap' grace. This is what the prophet Jeremiah reiterates, "peace, peace, when there is no peace." It's a lie. It's a façade. Let's be honest, we've lost the knowledge of the nature of God in many of our churches. We think that God never acts in judgement and in reality there is no such thing as sin. If that's the case, then why does grace matter? Why does Jesus death and resurrection matter? If sin is no big deal and God accepts us as we are, then there is no salvation. As we see here in Joel and across the breadth of the Bible, our sin matters. God does not love us as we are. In fact, our sin brings our demise. We can't know the grace of God, truly, if we don't know the damage of our sin. The Israelite people wanted to ignore their sin. They wanted to act like it wasn't there. And for a while they could get away with it. But now, it's smack-dab in front of their face. They have been decimated. And Joel is urging them and pleading with them to cry out to the Lord. To express their pain and anguish. To trust that God can handle their pain.

Joel is naming the tragic reality for his people. For over a year, I've known a tragic reality for Providence Church. I've prayed over it over-and-over again. I've sought outside sources for confirmation of this reality. It's been confirmed. So this truth, this reality, that I am about to tell you is not something I came up with yesterday. I've alluded to this reality in many of my sermons. I've even written up this truth in multiple sermons and have since deleted it because it wasn't the right timing. But I believe the time is ripe to share this truth, this reality for Providence Church. It's hard for me to share this because, one, it's not in my best interest do so. It's in my best interest to ignore this reality. Two, it's going to hurt. Here it is: Providence Church is going to die. I don't know when. I'm not saying it's going to happen tomorrow. I'm not saying it's going to happen at the end of the summer. But death is knocking at our door. Providence Church is going to die. Let's take a moment to let that sink in. (Pause) I'm sure there a number of reactions happening inside you as I say that and name that reality. Some of you have known this reality for some time and so you accept that this is the truth. You may even be saying in your head, "duh! Look around us!" Others of you are going to be angry with me thinking "Why did you have to say that?!?!? Why

couldn't you keep your mouth shut!?!?" Because it's the truth and we need to name this truth to open up new realities. Others of you are flat out going to say "no we're not. Look around us! We still have some wonderful people here!" You are wonderful people and I believe that you should continue to cherish the relationships you have with each other, but not at the expense of advancing the Kingdom of God. You may even say, "We have all this money, isn't that reason enough to believe that God still wants us to keep going?" Maybe, but I don't think so. At this point, I believe the money feeds our denial of this reality. Yes, we could limp along for probably another 10 to 15 years with the money we have. In the mean time some of you are going to move away and others of you will be dead. Do you really want to watch Providence slowly die and even more than now slowly lose it's dignity? Honestly, I believe the money is more of a curse than a blessing at this point. It keeps us all comfortable, but it doesn't advance the Kingdom of God. Some of you may say, "Well...let's revitalize." I'm all for that, but from what I've seen over the past few years, your actions have proven to me that you're not up for that. It could be for various reasons, but you're not up for a revitalization. You're willing to cheer someone like me on towards revitalization, but the sacrifice and cost revitalization requires is not something you're willing to pay. Namely, time and energy. You've shown me that you have other priorities. I'm not judging those priorities, but to romanticize revitalization is another denial of this reality. So I named at least three reactions to me naming the death of Providence, acceptance, denial and angry. Those are three stages of what: Grief.

We need to mourn Providence. We need to mourn our pending death. All the signs point towards this death. The most recent nail in the coffin is losing Kathy and Jim. I don't name this with any pleasure, but like I said, I actually name it to my personal detriment. Later in Joel there is this passage about restoration and dreaming dreams. And it sounds romantic and great, but we have to do first things first. Restoration, hope and dreams can't happen until we can name and take responsibility for the death of Providence. You can choose to ignore this reality. You can even take your anger out on me, but that's not going to stop the freight train from coming. The small sliver of hope that I'll give you is that I believe there are options/alternatives that will give you hope for the Kingdom of God and allow Providence to die with dignity, but they can't be had if we can't accept the reality of our death. Providence, there is something better than this. Something better than waiting out 10-15 years to watch the money disappear. To watch as people move away because of other life circumstances. To watch as the ones we love here die away. There is something better than the do nothing path. Again, I'm calling you to cry out to the Lord with me. I'm trying to do as Joel instructs. And elders, I'll call you out again to do the same. Spiritually lead these people into mourning and grief. And one of the ways we're going to engage in

mourning and grief today is by reading and reviewing the Psalms. I've chosen the Psalms listed in your bulletin as ones that may potentially connect with your lament and your grief. We're going to take a moment here for you to read over these Psalms. At the end of this time, I'm going to invite you to read one of these Psalms aloud to all of us or just a portion of one of these Psalms that connect with you and your grief. Let's enter into a time of grief and mourning for Providence Church...