

On Grieving and Broken Hearts

A sermon based on Joel 1:1-12 and Joel 2:21-29 and preached by Reverend Dr. Jan Nolting Carter for the virtual congregation of Church of the Pilgrims, Washington D.C. on Sunday, August 30, 2020.

The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel:

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?

3

Tell your children of it,
 and let your children tell their children,
 and their children another generation.

4

What 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.

5

Wake up, you drunkards, and weep;
 and wail, all you wine-drinkers,
over the sweet wine,
 for it is cut off from your mouth.
For a nation has invaded my land,
 powerful and innumerable;
its teeth are lions' teeth,
 and it has the fangs of a lioness.

7

It 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.

8

Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth
 for the husband of her youth.

9

The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off
 from the house of the Lord.
The priests mourn,
 the ministers of the Lord.

10

The fields are devastated,
 the ground mourns;
for the grain is destroyed,
 the wine dries up,
 the oil fails.

11 Be dismayed, you farmers,

wail, you vinedressers,
over the wheat and the barley;
for the crops of the field are ruined.

12

The 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.

Joel 2:21-29

Do not fear, O soil;
be glad and rejoice,
for the Lord has done great things!

22

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.

23

O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the Lord your God;
for he has given the early rain[c] 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.

Yesterday, I awoke at the beach. When the blinds were open, my bedroom window looked out over the salt marsh. When I made coffee in the kitchen, I could watch the sunlight dance on the ocean. I took a walk to say goodbye to the beach, to offer gratitude for the time that we spent there this summer. Folly Beach offered us breathing space from the quarantine of the pandemic in June. It offered us restoration as vacation in August. It has grown into a happy place for me. Part of it is the beauty. Part of it is the lovely house we have enjoyed. Most of it is the people. We travel well with our friends. There is a kind of synchrony about our being together. I could feel the waves of grief coming on Friday. It was hard for us all to leave yesterday. It's visceral and emotional. Perhaps the most helpful thing about the nine hour drive back to DC is the transitional passage it gave us.

I know you all have places like that—places that restore your soul, give you a sense of connection and remind you where you fit into the universe. Pause for a moment. Think about that place. Glimpse the pause, the restoration, the connectedness it gives you. Breathe.

My friends, we are in need of clinging to those places and spaces, those sacred spaces that offer us respite and restoration, even for a few moments, because we are in the midst of waves and waves of grief.

The prophet Joel named the plagues on his people in our scripture passage today. Locusts were destroying the land. They had eaten every leaf and laid the landscape barren. It was an environmental disaster. It was also a communal disaster. They were grieving. It felt as though they lost everything—and in many ways, they had. Hope seemed like a far off, distant dream. They were in pain. They were thirsty for water, they were thirsty for hope.

There is something especially resonant about the predicament of the Israelites.

We are suffering from plagues of locusts.

California is burning with wildfires.

Laura, a Category 4 hurricane, hit the Gulf Coast and dumped water and cast about high winds as far inland as Little Rock, AK.

The political party in power spent the week fear mongering and concluded its convention on the lawn of the People's House—the White House, with the declaration — we are here and they are not.

While I was on vacation, the Senate Intelligence Committee released its 1000 page report, in many ways validating the Mueller Report, that there was indeed Russian tampering in the 2016 Election, something that has not ever stopped. This occurred with the participation and collaboration of the current administration. The report, tantamount to a plague of locusts unto itself—was mostly buried in the news cycles of

the conventions, wildfires and the hurricane. I heard one person say, a nuclear bomb went off in our midst and we missed it.

This does not even include the locusts of racial injustice. 400 years and counting. The most recent horrors occurred in Kenosha, WI where Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back. Militia vigilantes, believing they are fostering “law and order” appeared on the scene, ratcheting up tensions and two people were killed. While Jacob Blake was shakeled to his hospital bed as he lie paralyzed, a vigilante who killed two people was offered water.

I have mentioned five plagues and haven't event mentioned the one that has changed our lives. 180,000 dead of COVID-19. It wasn't that long ago that we marked the 100,000th death. We are nearly 200,000.

Those are the national locusts. And there are more.

We have some locusts of our own, right here.

In our city, the shelters are full and overflowing. The food lines are long. COVID-19 has ravaged us physically and economically.

Our hearts are hurting. We are grieving all of these plagues of locusts.

It is no wonder that I didn't want to leave the beach. It seemed really far away from all of this.

Of course, it is not.

And right here. Right now, in our zoom circle. We are grieving. We have been grieving. It started with losing a beloved Pastor. And then a beloved Associate Pastor. But really, long before that, there has been a long line of loss—beloved members of the congregation moving away to engage in the next chapter of their lives—for new jobs, for retirement, for opportunities away from DC. Some leavings have been joyful—buoyed by an experience at Pilgrims and living in our nation's capital, there has been a departure to share growth and knowledge elsewhere. Some have not: angry about how something was done or decided in the congregation, people have left, seeking connection elsewhere. These leavings have been part of decades of change of the role of church in society and the fall of Christendom. And then recently: more staff leaving. The closing of the Pilgrimage. Rachel leaving. And now I am leaving.

And many of you are grieving loves ones: family, friends who are family and friends who have died. Some from COVID-19. Some from other things.

The loss is acute. It is multi-faceted.

It is a lot of grief. Waves and waves of grief.

I recently discovered a book by Jaco Hamman, *When Steeples Cry*. He currently is the Professor of Religion, Psychology, and Culture and Director of the Program in Theology and Practice at Vanderbilt Divinity School. *When Steeples Cry* (2005) is one of his earlier books, but it is relevant right now. I read it on vacation and, quite frankly, I wish I had it years ago—especially when I began my time journeying with you. Dr. Hamman describes “the work of mourning is the intentional process of letting go of relationships, dreams, visions and more, of rediscovering and finding a new identity after the experience of loss and change.” (Hamman, 47) Mourning is not about replacement, but about defining a new identity. (47). For mourning a loved one in our lives, it means creating a new identity without our loved one. What does it mean to be a person in relationship without the loved one lost? For mourning in community, What does it mean to be a community when the environment has changed?

Hamman describes five different kinds of loss congregations are continually dealing with:

- Material loss: change in financial status
- Relationship loss: missing people.
- Intrapsychic loss: “What might have been. . . “
- Functional loss, and
- Role loss of interactional relationships

Even without the swirling locusts in our national community, as Pilgrims, we have been and continue to deal with these losses:

- Loss of financial status
- Loss of beloved people: staff and members of the congregation
- Loss of the vision that of what we thought the congregation was—and in fact, was, but is not now,
- The loss of being a leader in WIN, in the presbytery and the denomination
- The loss of many capacities to be church for lack of people and the changing circumstances of people who are here—aging, demanding jobs, families who need attention, elders who need care.

Hamman identifies processes that a community experiences in community mourning: First numbness, a short-lived experience, that can turn to anger and hostility and then to despair. There is often yearning and searching for those who are lost and an effort to try to replace that person with someone else—always unsuccessfully. That person can never be the person or people who were lost. There is inevitable disorganization and despair. We know something about all of these experiences. Up close and personally.

But counter to what you might expect, Hamman identifies grief as a sign of hope. “Grieving is the painful discrepancy between what is perceived as reality and what continues to be dreamed of as reality.” (70) If grieving can be done as felt emotions are honored, where curiosity is engaged, where there is learning from others and walking alongside, there can be movement. If grieving can involve sacred silence and bearing witness to the struggle of others as well as respecting the inevitable disorder and confusion, movement can occur. Mourning leads to transformation. There is the possibility of letting go and living into a new identity.

I have come to believe that one of the reasons I need to leave you is that I am have become connected with the past. You need to discern God’s future for you that is different from the past, grounded in the lessons you carry from it, but different in this vastly changed world we are living in.

But mourning to a new identity is exceedingly hard when the waves of grief keep coming and coming. It is not as though it is possible to fully grieve one thing before another whollops us.

That is one of the reasons Jaco Hamman says all of this is very messy and seems disorganized. Because it is.

Our second scripture this morning offers us some relief from the despair of plagues of locusts. We are in need of relief! Desperately in need. So were the Israelites. The horizon was barren. Their hearts were parched.

Remember those words:

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.

You shall know that I am in your midst.

You shall know that I am in your midst.

Joel speaks of God’s presence with the Israelites. Peter uses this passage when he speaks to those gathered on Pentecost. He reminds them that even in the midst of what looked like despair—the loss of Jesus and the loss of their vision of what being

faithful to God looked like—God is in the midst, pouring our God’s Spirit with dreams and visions. For the Israelites Joel was talking to, it was about life after the plague of locusts. There was nothing left of what was before. It had been devoured. For Peter speaking to the faithful after the coming of the Holy Spirit, it was a new beginning after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Those dreams and visions were definitely not what they thought being faithful would be when they journeyed with Jesus.

Joel’s voice is strong and clear. It is God speaking to the Israelites: You shall know that I am in your midst.

That voice is strong and clear to us too: You shall know that I am in your midst.

We believe in a Triune God: God who is always creating, always connecting. We believe in Jesus, God’s Son, God Incarnate, God-with-Us. We believe in the continuing renewing of the Spirit weaving among us, pouring out God’s presence on each and every person—not just a select few, but everyone, Joel says, even those who are enslaved.

That is powerful presence. That is hope. And we need some right now. Come, Holy Spirit, Come!

So what do we do?

We have to keep naming our grief: our national grief, our community grief and our personal grief. We have to keep telling stories to one another—stories of lament, stories of curiosity, stories of questioning. Those stories and exploration, the active work of grieving, will lead us to keep mourning and that mourning, that living in the gap between what we thought was and what could be will lead us to the dreams and visions that God has poured out on us.

It already is.

Thanks be to God for God’s presence with us. Amen.