

Joel 2:23–32: What Happens after the Promises?
Jim Nogalski, May 12, 2019

The book of Joel is not well known apart from the famous passage cited in Acts 2. When Jews from foreign lands spoke in unknown languages, no one had trouble understanding them. Some were amazed and some accused them of being drunk, but Peter said:

¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. . . . ²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ (Acts 2:16-21 NRSV)

But roughly 500 years before Peter took up these words, the prophet Joel penned them in a very different context. The book of Joel begins as the Murphy’s Law of the prophetic corpus. At the beginning of Joel, anything that can go wrong has gone wrong.

Joel begins by calling attention to a series of four locust plagues, each one more devastating than the previous one: “What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust devoured. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust devoured, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust devoured.” (Joel 1:4)

But that’s not all. Then the land is invaded by an army so powerful that the prophet describes its brutality in terms of a savage lion: Wake up, you drunkards, . . . because a nation, powerful and beyond number, has invaded my land. Its teeth are like lions’ teeth; its fangs are like those of a lioness. (Joel 1:5-6 CEB)

But that’s not all. The land is also hit with a drought of monumental proportions: ¹⁵ What a terrible day! The day of the LORD is near; it comes like chaos from the Almighty. ¹⁶ Isn’t the food cut off right before our eyes? . . . ¹⁷ The grain shrivels under the shovels; the barns are empty. The granaries lie in ruin because the grain has dried up. (Joel 1:15-17 CEB)

But that’s not all. The effects of the drought lead to wild fires so powerful that they devastate the habitat and the animals begin to suffer terribly, causing the prophet to intercede with a desperate prayer: ¹⁹ To you, LORD, I cry, for fire has completely destroyed the pastures of the wilderness; and flames have burned all the trees of the field. ²⁰ Even the field’s wild animals cry to you because the streams have dried up; the fire has completely destroyed the meadows of the wilderness. (Joel 1:19-20 CEB)

But that is still not all. The prophet envisions a coming day of judgment when God will lead a heavenly army to attack the land and the city. Chapter 2 begins with eleven verses that describe the march of this unstoppable army from the mountain tops, across the land. Then they scale the wall of Jerusalem as though it were not even the slightest obstacle. Yes, even 2,500 years ago, Joel sees that a wall won’t stop anything.

I told you. The book of Joel plays out Murphy’s Law: *Anything* that can go wrong will go wrong. The prophet responds to all this devastation with a plea to the people to go to the temple and turn to YHWH, their God, not because that God is a God of vengeance and wrath, but because of YHWH’s penchant for compassion and grace. Joel takes up Exod 34:6 and says to the people: “Return to YHWH, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger; he multiplies lovingkindness, and he changes his mind about evil. (Joel 2:13 Nog)

What happens next in Joel is triply surprising. First, we are never told how people responded to the prophet’s call to repent and turn to YHWH. We do not know whether they arose in mass to lay their souls bare before YHWH, or whether they just stare at the prophet in disbelief. We are not told whether they responded positively or negatively. Instead, YHWH speaks.

Second, YHWH speaks words of promise. Gone are the prophetic words of confrontation. YHWH's promises reverse the situation on every front. YHWH promises to veto Murphy's Law:

- 1) YHWH promises he will send food and fertility to the land in 2:19.
- 2) YHWH promises to remove the enemy who has attacked from the north in 2:20.
- 3) YHWH promises to send rain to the land, ending the drought in v. 23.
- 4) YHWH promises to refill the storage facilities: "The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil." (Joel 2:24 NRSV)
- 5) YHWH promises to repair the damage done by the same four locust plagues with which the book began: "I will repay you for the years of devastation from the cutting locust, the swarming locust, the hopping locust, and the destroying locust." (Joel 2:25 NRSV)

As a result, everything will be right between YHWH and YHWH's people. It's the perfect Hollywood ending.

Now comes the third surprise. This ending is not the end. The promise of an abundance of food, political security, and theological harmony is only a transitional word of preparation for an even grander vision for YHWH's people. Immediately after the Hollywood ending comes the promise we heard in the mouth of Peter in Acts. Joel 2:28 recounts a second phase of promise, one that simply begins: "And it will happen afterward." After YHWH restores the land and the people, then things really change: distinctions of gender, age, and class disappear for those who worship YHWH. YHWH will pour out his spirit on all flesh so that women and men can prophesy—that means to speak on behalf of YHWH. The young and the old will see prophetic visions; even male and female slaves will receive YHWH's spirit. As a result, everyone who calls on the name of YHWH will be saved.

Yeah, that didn't happen. Judaism did not allow women into the temple, not in the time of Jesus and not for nearly two millennia. Slavery and indentured servitude continued, both in Judaism and in Christianity. Slavery is less prevalent today, but pockets persist. Even after the events at Pentecost that are often cited as the birth of Christianity, the equality of women in ecclesial settings did not shift much for nearly two millennia. In very many ways, we are still working to open doors for women in churches. It has happened in some places, among some communities of faith, but not in others. We still live and work in hope, but after 2,500 years this speech is no longer a prophetic prediction, it's a strategic plan.

By now you may be wondering, what does the song about Winter have to do with this sermon? Well, the song describes life *after* the promises. I wrote the song as a young twenty something year old in January of 1980, nearly forty years ago. I had finished one semester of seminary, but a knee operation the previous summer had taken most of my money so I had to sit out the spring semester and work full-time as the assistant janitor at a church roughly three miles from the apartment where I lived. I awoke early that day to find five inches of snow from the previous evening. There was no way that my thirteen year old car with balding tires was going to get me to work that day, so I set off to work on foot. As I did, I looked around me and took in the sheer beauty of a city bathed in winter's telltale sign and clothed with a thick overcoat of nature's morning dew. I saw the tree branches silhouetted against the freshly fallen snow and the way that the branches bent beneath the weight.

You have to understand. I was a young idealist in high school and college. I wanted to make a difference, to make my life count for something. I was 23 years old and had already lived longer than my biological father who was killed when he was 22. I grew up in a time when racial justice, civil rights, and the Vietnam War filled the airwaves. I believed Martin Luther King when he paraphrased the words of the abolitionist preacher, Theodore Parker, from a sermon delivered in 1853. King said: "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

But I was impatient. I wanted to bend the arc faster and harder. Knee surgery in the summer of 1979 and impending poverty by the winter of 1980 slowed me down, made me take stock and reevaluate.

I never claimed to be Martin Luther King, but I wanted to be. Slowly, it dawned on me: that would never happen. Years later, a line from a song by Harry Chapin resonated with me when he looked at his own life and said “A tame and toothless tabby can’t produce a lion’s roar.” But in 1980, while walking through the snow I was still in transition. The moment of this walk had a profound impact. I came to realize I had to slow down. I could not accomplish a lifetime of work in a few short years. I had to live in the present even while I leaned into the future.

And yet, I still looked at life in black and white, wrong or right. It would take longer to learn to see life in color, and to learn that gray is often the most prominent color in the moral universe. Now, nearly forty years on, my older self would like to say some things to my younger self who wrote this song. You should not have been so hard on the merchant who shoveled the snow from his sidewalk. He was only trying to make a safe walkway for his customers, and he had to make a living. You saw children playing at war with non-lethal weapons, but many children their age had to take up arms as adults, and the world still suffers from military conflicts. Most importantly, my older self would say to my younger self, you have become one of those round white men, but my older self would also say, do not confuse my gray hair for apathy. I still want to be on the right side of history. I still want to see the arc of the moral universe bend in the right direction. But life gets complicated and busy. I no longer need to roar like a lion, but I still want to help the least of these and to become one of the lambs of God. I don’t march in political rallies, but I am proud to have been a member of two Baptist churches who have had four women pastors between them. I no longer need to try and save the world, but I do hope to leave my little corner a little better than I found it. I no longer dream of becoming a grand orator who can stir the souls of all who listen. On my good days, it’s enough to aim higher, to try and be George Bailey, the character in the 1940’s movie who learned to see how the little kindnesses he did rippled across the lives of those with whom he came in contact. The older me would also say to the younger me: you got two things right. First, your heart was in the right place: peace and justice are more noble goals than money and power. Second, it is still important to stop and look and listen. God speaks in the stillness. God speaks in the beauty. Finally, the older me would tell the older me: don’t give up. Remember where you have come from. Be kind to your younger self. It’s how you got here. Keep the goals before you while you still push forward.

Joel’s vision did not come to pass in Joel’s lifetime, nor in the lifetime of Peter, and it still has not yet been fully realized in Peter’s church. On the other hand, sometimes if you look and listen, you can feel the spirit of God move among your sons and daughters, and you can see the dreams of the old and the young come to fruition in pockets.

I will simply close with the words of Carrie Newcomer. I offer these words as a prayer and an admonition: The empty self still hears the call,

To live in the center of the ache and awe.

It’s there the hope of the whole world shines.

And yes, there still is time.

So today I’ll drop stones into the river.

And the current takes them out into forever.

And the truth is most of us will never know,
Where our best intentions go.

And still I’ll drop another stone.

Winter by Jim Nogalski (January, 1980)

Gently falling pieces of winter's telltale signs
Covering the city, mark the passing of the time
With a freshly tailored overcoat of nature's morning dew,
Sheltering the urban air in quiet solitude.
The branches of the trees stand forth,
As a monument to life,
Illumined by the new found light,
Burdened by its weight.
The streets are paved for paradise,
As though none had been before.
Yet, the merchant feels compelled to plow
The walk outside his door.
 Must changes be for dreamers of another way of life?
 Crazy folks with crazy dreams of wrong turned into right.
 Springtime changed the summer. Summer changed the fall.
 Somewhere in this circle, winter changed them all.
Round, white men are everywhere, but soon they'll melt away.
Expressions of their apathy show nothing left to say.
Children play the make-believe wars they have made,
Where swords are only made of ice,
And snowballs their grenades.
Some are tied to what has been, and some what is to be.
Few have felt the beauty here for us to see.
Winter slows the rapid pace.
It stills the morning air.
Giving us the time to stop, to hear God's whispered prayer.
 Must changes be for dreamers of another way of life?
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