

“Choose Hope”

Joel 2:23-32

Five months ago, on the first Sunday afternoon in June, I found myself riding in the back of an ambulance on my way to the Southwest Hospital emergency room unable to speak or move my right arm and hand. I was scared because my brain wasn't functioning properly on one side where a blood clot had traveled to from my heart.

When everything came back online about halfway to the hospital, I could decide to let it defeat me or I could choose hope. I could decide not to do the Black Eyed Peas fast paced father/daughter dance a few days later at Rachel's wedding because it was too risky. I could decide not to lead more mature folks to the Passion Play in Germany and the less mature teenagers backpacking in Colorado. I could continue to drive my old Buick Century or I could upgrade to a '08 Dodge Dakota. When life's difficulties show up as they eventually do, when either choose to be negative or we choose to have hope. Along life's journey, we learn either to be helpless or to be optimistic. And John Smeets's favorite T.V. preacher agrees.

Joel Osteen's weekly T.V. sermons are viewed by 7 million people and he's written 3 bestselling books with revealing titles. “Your Best Life Now”, “It's Your Time” and “Become a Better You.”

Because with Joel, it's all about you, with little mention of Christ or Scripture, he has come under scrutiny for preaching a positives only version of Christianity. A recent CBS 60 Minutes report said that “Osteen preaches his own version of what is known as the ‘prosperity

gospel,' – that God is a loving, forgiving God who will reward believers with health, wealth, and happiness. It's the centerpiece of every sermon."

"A mature Christian who is following Jesus should experience financial comfort, freedom from relational strife, and a life unmarked by lasting anxiety or depression," Joel says.

A quote from a recent sermon: "You are supposed to live a victorious life – an abundant life. You are not supposed to live under your circumstances. You're supposed to rise above your circumstances. I know God holds victory in store for the upright. You have not seen your greatest victories yet. You have not seen your best days – they are still out in front of you."

In his most recent book, Joel writes, "If you develop an image of victory, success, health, abundance, joy, peace, and happiness, nothing on earth will be able to hold those things from you."

I refer to Joel as the modern day Norman Vincent Peale who was the popular "positive thinker" when I was growing up. As Lutheran Christians approaching our wearing red Reformation Sunday next Sunday we have some good questions for Norman and Joel. What do I do with pain in my life? – Whether it be a disease, a lost job, a lost loved one, or whatever. Or the title to Rabbi Harold Kushner's classic book, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Where do sin and suffering fit into the Christian life?

Well, there's another Joel in our Old Testament that tells a fuller story that includes sin and suffering and yet still very much encourages optimism and hope. And the old Joel would agree with the new Joel, that our best days are still ahead of us.

Joel is different from the other Old Testament prophets. He does not judge the social, moral, and religious failings of God's people, even though he could have. Joel doesn't even criticize Israel's political leaders.

Instead, Joel is written to a community reeling in pain and in need of hope. Though everyone thought "the day of the Lord" was going to be about their deliverance, it turned out to be destruction – on them and not their enemies!

In Joel 1:4-7, a massive swarm of locusts have devoured the land . . .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.⁶ 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.

Their food and way of life were destroyed. Feed crops were gone, and soon the herds dependent on them would die. In verses 9-10, even the priests are in mourning because no offerings are coming in. . . .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.

Now the people are left to groan and to mourn their losses. Catastrophe had shattered their lives, their hope, and their faith. They would have to try to pick themselves up and choose hope.

But into that bleak reality God speaks through Joel. God wanted more from the people than just weeping and wailing; God wanted them! Joel 2:12-13 . . . ¹² Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

God didn't want their groaning but wanted them to renew their relationship with him. When we return to the Lord, especially in our darkest hour, he will welcome us home like the loving and forgiving Father in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Our Father, who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

Then in our text, Joel looks into the future as prophets do, to see if we will choose helplessness or hope, negativity or optimism, death or life?

Joel prophesies better days ahead when the drought will give way to plentiful rain, when crops will again bear much fruit, when there will be plenty to eat, and God will "pour out his spirit on all flesh" renewing his relationship with his people. Listen again to Joel's prophecy of hope in verses 23-29 . . . ²³ 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. 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 afterwards 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.

That sounds like a whole lot of hope. The people are to choose hope and not helplessness. In the same way, we as God's people are to choose hope even when our loved one is battling cancer and despite the prayers of the faithful, he continues to journey toward death and the gate to eternal life. We are to choose hope even when a layoff crushes a promising career and brings financial crisis. We are to choose hope even when our child gets bad grades despite the hours we spend on homework with them. We are to choose hope even when on a gurney in the back of an ambulance unable to speak or move. We are to choose hope even when our prayers feel as though they're bouncing back off the ceiling. Joel encourages us to choose hope even on our darkest days of depression and despair.

Ultimately, there is the eternal hope so eloquently prophesied by John of Patmos in the Book of Revelation that we are studying in our Monday evening and Wednesday morning groups.

Lutheran Pastor Barbara Rossing and author of our Bible Study writes, "Poverty, martyrdom, social marginalization, and political oppression all were features of first century life for followers of Christ. How easy it is to see only bad things when we suffer. In Revelation 7, John encourages believers to look beyond their present situation and to anticipate the joy of

being in the presence of a living, loving Lord. John shows us that our troubles, as real as they are, are not all there is. Life with God cannot be compared with anything we experience now. What comfort, what hope!”

Revelation 7:9 . . . “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”

Choose hope and healing when you come forward for prayer and the laying on of hands.

Choose hope and may the peace of God . . .

#632 - O God, Our Help in Ages Past