

Looking at the prophets seem like an odd place to be during Advent doesn’t it? We are used to the stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth. John the Baptist and Mary. Joseph. We don’t have Christmas plays about the prophets, per say, and yet their words are so important. They tell us of what has been hoped for from generation to generation - the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah we are preparing our hearts anew for this season - Jesus Christ.

The prophet Joel is writing at a time when a Messiah was desperately needed. The world seemed to be falling apart. There was a plague of locust moving throughout the land that destroyed everything in their wake. Nothing was left. In front of you, you may still be able to see the crops. But when you looked behind you there was just devastation. Devastation you knew was going to come and sweep over what you could see in front of you as well.

With the land being destroyed so was the economy. People didn’t have enough to eat. They didn’t have crops to sell. People were living in desolation.

The prophet Joel speaks into the lives of the Israelites during this time and tells them the story of the prophets that came before him. He built upon their teachings and claimed the importance of the moment that the people were experiencing. This is a hard moment. But depending on where you are with God, more hard days are going to be upon you, for the day of the Lord is at hand.

Right before we jump into today’s scripture passage that is exactly what Joel is talking about. “Truly the day of the Lord is great; terrible indeed - who can endure it?”

While these don’t seem like words of hope at first, they certainly are. For the Day of the Lord is going to be a day of vindication for those who have sought righteousness and a day of grave punishment for those who have fled from the Lord. Joel is calling on the ancient Israelites to examine their hearts to see if their true purpose was in the Lord.

And that does take examination. Because there would have been many folks who would have said, yes, Lord! Of course I am in a place of being aligned with your will and purpose. Don’t you see! I come to the temple every chance I get. I present my offering to you.

To which the Lord would reply, but you don’t know my purposes. For you are just observing religious rituals that aren’t sufficient. You aren’t taking care of the widow and the poor. You come to temple and give because of how it makes you look to others. You don’t know my heart at all.

But as hard as that would be to hear, God continues to call people back to himself. He still gives them a chance to return their heart to its right place. To confess when they made worship something it was never intended to be. To weep for the times they have not treated others as children of God.

The punishment that people are experiencing with the locust - that’s nothing like what is to come on the Day of the Lord. So people need to repent and return to the Lord who will relent from punishment.

This time when people are crying out “how much longer, Lord?” Its just a taste of what is to come. For those who have forgotten that Yahweh is God. For those whose hearts and desires are not aligned with the purposes of the Lord. This time can build your faith, however, if you see it as a call to repentance.

In many ways, it feels like we have been living into our own plague of locusts. The economy has been all over the place. We have seen injustice. And I have heard more than once that folks feel that God is trying to get our attention. Which may very well be true.

What do you think that God is trying to tell us? I think God is inviting us like ancient Israelites to examine our hearts. To confess that our way of going about doing things in this world isn't always pleasing to God. To admit that sometimes we turn to ritual more for comfort than to magnify God's name. To cry out that we have not loved the widow and the orphan and those who have had the world turn its back on them as children of God. That we may say we love God with our lips, but our actions do not always show purposes that are aligned with God.

We have made Advent into a season of joy - which in many ways it is. But it is also a time to prepare our very selves for when Christ will come again. Not as a babe in Bethlehem, but as the King, triumphant. The Day of the Lord is at hand.

Advent is a time of reflection, but is also an invitation to transformation. We don't just reflect so we remember the stories of old, as important as they are. We reflect and ask God to come into our hearts and change us. And that is an ongoing process. A continual, daily call to submission to Christ. And that starts in our hearts.

The heart is the source of who we are. Our moral strength. The place from which our actions and words flow forth. So if a transformation is going to take place it has to start there. Especially the type of transformation that re-orient's one's whole life.

The second part of today's scripture lesson comes on the tail end of talking about the blessed future that is to come. A time when the people of Israel will know that God is right there with them, in their midst. What a glorious day, when they will no longer be put to shame. And after that time there will be a pouring out of the Spirit of God. People will prophesy. There will be dreams and visions.

Do you recognize those words? They are the same ones that Peter lifted up to the crowds on the day of Pentecost. The day when the Holy Spirit came as a mighty wind and fire and the church was born. And three thousand people were converted that day.

Hearts were changed that Pentecost day. Just as hearts continue to be changed today. We however, are in danger when we think that we are fine. That we stop calling on the Lord to examine our hearts and point us in the direction God's plans and purposes. When we stop preparing ourselves by submitting to God.

Let us take time this Advent season to hand our hearts over to God. Let us seek to be led by the power of the Spirit. Let us be Advent people who make the name of the Lord known! Amen and amen.