

Intersections



SESSION 15: Passages from Joel 2, Acts 2, and Romans 8

Spirit of gentleness, blow through our wilderness...

Comment 1

In keeping with scripture, faithful Jews have long celebrated a feast whose name in Hebrew is *Shavuot*, which literally means “the Feast of Weeks.” It’s called *Shavuot* in the Hebrew text of both Exodus 34:22 and Deuteronomy 16:10.

Shavuot was traditionally celebrated seven weeks *after* the first day of Passover. However, if, *instead of starting after* Passover, you *include* Passover in your counting out of days, then the interval between Passover and *Shavuot* is fifty days. That’s why Greek-speaking Jews began calling it “Pentecost.” In Greek, *pente* means fifty.

Comment 2

Exodus 23:16 describes this holy day as a “festival of reaping.” In keeping with that imagery, which celebrates the life-giving importance of grain, faithful Jews traditionally read aloud the book of Ruth during their celebration of *Shavuot* or “Pentecost.”

In like manner, Numbers 28:26 refers to this feast as “the Day of First Fruits.” It’s a day to give thanks for the beginning of a new harvest.

Comment 3

The book of Acts uses this long-standing Jewish holy day to provide a unique theological framework for our Christian understanding of certain events in the early days after Jesus’ ascension into the radiant Presence of God.

Because of this important association, modern Christians have developed their own celebrations of Pentecost, which always falls exactly

seven weeks after Resurrection Sunday. In 2017, that means June 4.

So in our Bible study session this week, we’ll seek to listen for God’s voice in the “intersection” of three biblical passages that each connect in some way with this ancient tradition.

Joel 2:1–3

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

¹ Blow a horn in Zion,
Sound an alarm on My holy mount!
Let all dwellers on earth tremble,
For the day of the LORD has come!

∴

It is close—

² A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of densest cloud
Spread like soot over the hills.

∴

A vast, enormous horde—
Nothing like it has ever happened,
And it shall never happen again
Through the years and ages.

∴

³ Their vanguard is a consuming fire,
Their rear guard a devouring flame.
Before them, the land was like the Garden of
Eden,
Behind them, a desolate waste;
Nothing has escaped them.

For Discussion

What kind of feelings does this language

evoke in you—and why?

Who in our world might find themselves facing situations that would evoke similar feelings?

Comment 4

This chapter in the book of Joel begins with a poetic expression of alarm. Terror rages. Fear roars. Dismay rises. “Blow a horn in Zion!” cries the prophet. “Sound the alarm! Let all who dwell on earth tremble!”

Why? Because from the viewpoint of many people in Joel’s day, it feels as if “the day of the LORD has come.” Normally, at *Shavuot* or “Pentecost,” joy would prevail. They’d be celebrating “first fruits” and the beginning of a new harvest, food and sustenance for months to come. But what we find here is not joy but panic. Like many people even today, the people of Joel’s day *blamed God* for what they saw as an impending disaster. Rightly or wrongly, they were convinced that what was happening out in the fields was an expression of an angry God’s deep rage.

Comment 5

Most scholars are convinced that the “darkness and gloom” mentioned in these verses was a poetic way of describing an invasion of locusts.

We are told that “a vast, enormous horde” of insects had “spread like soot over the hills.” Because these highly destructive creatures tended to eat everything in their path, the prophet poetically describes them as a “consuming fire.” They are like “a devouring flame.”

For people who are wholly dependent on the food that they can grow, locusts are a disaster. So they’re not celebrating. They’re mourning.

Comment 6

With poetic flair, the prophet says that this invasion is causing fields that had once been as lush as the “Garden of Eden” to become, instead, like “desolate waste.” No field is immune. The locusts eat everything that they can find.

As we get an expanded description of the destruction that is brought by these locusts, it becomes easier and easier for us to imagine the

overwhelming feelings that any “invasion” like this must have generated. We understand the feelings, for we, too, have faced overwhelming setbacks and deep uncertainties. In our lives and in the lives of those we care about, disasters continue to unfold.

Joel 2:4–11

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

⁴ They [the locusts] have the appearance of horses,
They gallop just like steeds.

⁵ With a clatter as of chariots
They bound on the hilltops,
With a noise like a blazing fire
Consuming straw;
Like an enormous horde
Arrayed for battle.

∴

⁶ Peoples tremble before them,
All faces turn ashen.

⁷ They rush like warriors,
They scale a wall like fighters.
And each keeps to his own track.

∴

Their paths never cross;

⁸ No one jostles another,
Each keeps to his own track.

And should they fall through a loophole,
They do not get hurt.

∴

⁹ They rush up the wall.
They dash about in the city;
They climb into the houses,
They enter like thieves
By way of the windows.

∴

¹⁰ Before them, earth trembles,
Heaven shakes,
Sun and moon are darkened,
And stars withdraw their brightness.

∴

¹¹ And the LORD roars aloud
At the head of His army;
For vast indeed is His host,
Numberless are those that do His bidding.

For great is the day of the LORD,
Most terrible—who can endure it?

For Discussion

What strikes you as particularly interesting or meaningful about these images?

What strikes you as puzzling?

In what ways do you think is it appropriate—or inappropriate—for us today to see natural disasters as the “roar” of “the LORD”?

Comment 7

Few of us are as dependent on locally grown food as were the people of Joel’s day. And few of us can even imagine an invasion of insects so intense that it has the sound of galloping horses, unstoppable, bounding over hilltops with a noise that sounds for all the world like a blazing fire.

Yet all of us know that many real people in our world *continue to tremble*. With a clatter as frightening as onrushing “chariots,” a devouring mob, grabbing more and more power, races to build walls of exclusion, rushes to break apart families, or gleefully tries to set fire to critically needed food, housing, or health-care benefits.

Comment 8

With galloping hooves, in our world, this same mob stomps into the mud on any program that provides needed supports for the poor or disabled. It smashes apart rules or regulations that could have protected our deeply distressed global environment. And then, with a sneer and a volley of obscenities, it throws a glowing box of lighted matches on long-simmering racial, ethnic, and religious hatreds.

We may not face exactly the same situations as the prophet knew. But much in our world still causes hearts to tremble. Much still causes faces to “turn ashen.”

Comment 9

We ourselves may not always imagine that God *causes* these destructive situations, but sometimes, deep in our accusing hearts, we do sometimes wonder how a Holy Redeemer could

possibly allow such things to happen.

Such thoughts, when they arise, can cause us or others to turn from the Voice that seeks to fill us with hope. Such thoughts can cause us to turn away from the very Breath that seeks to embrace us, seeks to encompass us, seek to empower us.

Joel 2:12–17

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

¹² “Yet even now”—says the LORD—
“Turn back to Me with all your hearts,
And with fasting, weeping, and lamenting.”

:::

¹³ Rend your hearts
Rather than your garments,
And turn back to the LORD your God.
For He is gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger, abounding in kindness,
And renouncing punishment.

:::

¹⁴ Who knows but He may turn and relent,
And leave a blessing behind
For meal offering and drink offering
To the LORD your God.

:::

¹⁵ Blow a horn in Zion,
Solemnize a fast,
Proclaim an assembly!

¹⁶ Gather the people,
Bid the congregation purify themselves.

:::

Bring together the old,
Gather the babes
And the sucklings at the breast;
Let the bridegroom come out of his chamber,
The bride from her canopied couch.

:::

¹⁷ Between the portico and the altar,
Let the priests, the LORD’s ministers, weep
And say:

“Oh, spare Your people, LORD!
Let not your possession become a mockery,
To be taunted by nations!
Let not the peoples say,
‘Where is their God?’”

For Discussion

What stands out for you about the language and images in these verses?

Overall, what do these verses suggest to you?

In what ways, if any, might these verses speak to our own world, in our own day?

Comment 10

The earlier part of this chapter was filled with panic and terror. An “army” of locusts had invaded the land, devouring crops, destroying grain before it could ripen, stripping bare the grape vineyards and olive orchards, leaving the whole nation blaming God for the disaster that had befallen them.

How could they celebrate *Shavuot* or “Pentecost” with no young grain or “first fruits” with which to rejoice?

Comment 11

Now, through the prophet Joel, God responds not from a throne of anger but from a throne of mercy, saying, “I know you’ve turned away from me in fear and despair. Your spirit is wounded. You’re broken. You think I’ve abandoned you.

“But I’m *still* here. I’m *still* gracious and compassionate. I’m *still* abounding in kindness. Never forget that I’m slow to anger. I’ve renounced punishment. I know the world around you is dangerous and frightening. But if you turn back to me, I’ll go through the anguish with you.”

Comment 12

When people are frightened, when disaster seems imminent, when hope seems lost, the world can fragment. People pull apart, sometimes thinking only of themselves, no longer working for the common good.

In a context like this, the prophet delivers God’s saving plea. “Gather together! Bring together your babes, your newly married individuals, and your aging elders. Let all priests and ministers come out of hiding. And then, with voices united, join together in singing. Sing something akin to a gentle hymn that will later be written by Fanny Crosby.”

*Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
hear my humble cry;
while on others thou art calling,
do not pass me by.
Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry;
while on others thou art calling,
do not pass me by.*

*Let me at thy throne of mercy
find a sweet relief;
kneeling there in deep contrition,
help my unbelief.
Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry;
while on others thou art calling,
do not pass me by.*

*Trusting only in thy merit,
would I seek thy face;
heal my wounded, broken spirit,
save me by thy grace.
Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry;
while on others thou art calling,
do not pass me by.*

*Thou, the spring of all my comfort,
more than life to me,
whom have I on earth beside thee?
Whom in heav’n but thee?
Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry;
while on others thou art calling,
do not pass me by.*

Joel 2:19–27 (slightly abbreviated)

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

¹⁹ In response to His people
The LORD declared:
“I will grant you the new grain,
The new wine, and the new oil,
And you shall have them in abundance....

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²⁰ “I will drive the northerner far from you,
[the ‘army’ of locusts that came from the
north],

I will thrust it into a parched and desolate
land [where that ‘horde’ will find

nothing to eat]—
 ...And the stench of it shall go up,
 And the foul smell rise.”
 For [the LORD] shall work great deeds....
 :::
²³ O children of Zion, be glad,
 Rejoice in the LORD your God.
 For He has given you the early rain in [His]
 kindness,
 Now He makes the rain fall [as] formerly—
 The early rain and the late—
²⁴ And threshing floors shall be piled with
 grain,
 And vats shall overflow with new wine and
 oil....
 :::
²⁶ “And you shall eat your fill
 And praise the name of the LORD your God
 Who dealt so wondrously with you—
 My people shall be shamed no more.
 :::
²⁷ “And you shall know
 That I am in the midst of Israel:
 That I the LORD am your God
 And there is no other...”

For Discussion

What does the imagery and language in these verses suggest to you?

What strikes you as important for us to remember about God’s response to the humble cry of a wounded and broken people?

Comment 13

“O children of Zion, be glad!” cries the prophet. “The locusts may still be with you. But in God’s own time, in God’s own moment, the LORD shall work great deeds. Rain will fall—dew-drops of mercy—if you will but look for them.

“At the moment, you may wonder how you will celebrate *Shavuot*. At the moment, you may feel at a loss about how to honor ‘Pentecost.’ But know this: God has promised blessings in abundance, ‘new grain,’ ‘new wine,’ ‘new oil.’ And here’s the greatest wonder: through it all, through hard trials and deep sorrows, God will be *in the*

midst’ of you, going through it with you, holding your hand, showing you the way.”

Joel 2:28–32

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

²⁸ After that,
 I will pour out My spirit on all flesh;
 Your sons and daughters shall prophesy;
 Your old men shall dream dreams,
 And your young men shall see visions.
²⁹ I will even pour out My spirit
 Upon male and female slaves in those days.
 :::
³⁰ Before the great and terrible day of the
 LORD comes,
 I will set portents in the sky and on earth:
 Blood and fire and pillars of smoke.
³¹ The sun shall turn into darkness
 And the moon into blood.
 :::
³² But everyone who invokes the name of the
 LORD shall escape; for there shall be a remnant
 on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, as the LORD
 promised. Anyone who invokes the LORD will be
 among the survivors.

For Discussion

What strikes you as particularly interesting or important about this portion of God’s response to the terrifying situation in which despairing people had found themselves?

In what ways can this portion of God’s promise be important for us in our day?

Comment 14

Things may get rough, says the prophet. You may feel abandoned and alone. You may feel mocked and ridiculed by the haughty. You may feel stomped on by the mighty, whether they be literal “locusts” or merely those locust-like humans who so readily “devour” that which could sustain the hungry and the weak.

But hang on, says the prophet. There is a God who stands in our midst. There is a God whose Spirit can feed us and fill us. There is a God who

can enable us to serve as witnesses, not just to our own people but to all the world.

Comment 15

It's a reminder that even when we think all hope is lost—even then—we can be counted among the “survivors.” We can be among the young and the old who gather together on Mount Zion, the women and the men in an upper room who unite their hearts and their hopes in old Jerusalem.

Though the mighty are still strutting, though the haughty are still stomping, we are seeing visions. We are dreaming dreams. And most of all, we are listening for the Wind. We are watching for the Fire. As the Spirit sings, we bask in the liberating Presence of the Holy One.

Comment 16

In 1971, a hymn writer named Priscilla Wright wrote a song in which she tried to capture some of the message conveyed in this portion of Joel. The words of her song were these:

*The fig tree is budding, the vine bearing fruit,
the wheat fields are golden with grain.
Thrust in the sickle, the harvest is ripe;
the Lord has given us rain!*

*Fear not, rejoice and be glad:
the Lord has done a great thing,
has poured out his Spirit on all who live,
on those who confess his name.
We shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
the mountains will drip with new wine.
“My children will drink of the fountain of life,
my children will know they are mine.”*

*Fear not, rejoice and be glad:
the Lord has done a great thing,
has poured out his Spirit on all who live,
on those who confess his name.*

*“My people will know that I am the Lord;
their shame I have taken away.
My Spirit will lead them together again,*

my Spirit will show them the way.”

*Fear not, rejoice and be glad:
the Lord has done a great thing,
has poured out his Spirit on all who live,
on those who confess his name.*

Acts 2:1–13

From the New Revised Standard Version

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

:::

³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

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⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrgia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

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¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

For Discussion

In what ways, if any, does this scene as pre-

sented in Acts meaningful “intersect” with what we’ve learned about “Pentecost” or with what we encountered in the second chapter of Joel?

Which aspects of this account speak to you most strongly—and why?

Comment 17

To a devastated people, devoured by forces beyond its control, the prophet Joel had delivered a message of hope, indicating that even as destruction was raging around them, the LORD would be “in the midst” of them.

As “survivors,” said Joel, they would gather in Jerusalem—men and women, young and old, rich and poor. And there, on Mount Zion, with dramatic “signs and portents,” God’s Spirit would make itself known.

Comment 18

In like manner, here in Acts, we are told that followers of Jesus gathered in the very city where Roman thugs had put their friend to death. It must have seemed an unlikely place to celebrate *Shavuot*, the “Pentecost” feast of “first fruits,” the “Pentecost” feast that marks the beginning of a new “harvest.” But gather, they did, says Acts.

And there came the sound of a mighty Wind, a Breath from Above that couldn’t be stilled. And on each of those who had gathered, there came “tongues of fire,” perhaps representing both the divine Voice and the divine Light, forces that no night can silence, no night can extinguish.

Comment 19

It was a diverse crowd, says Acts: people from many nations, speaking many different languages. They were young and old. They were male and female. They were enslaved and free. And on each, the Spirit came. All barriers were broken. All human distinctions were pushed aside—even the barriers of language and culture.

Acts inserts a note of subtle irony. It says that all were amazed and perplexed—and some sneered. The scoffers suggest that those for whom all human distinctions have been cast aside are simply “filled with new wine.”

Comment 20

No, as Peter is about to remind these scoffers, they are *not* “drunk,” but they are indeed “filled with new wine.” To be filled with “new grain, new oil, and new wine”—at a time when you thought all hope was lost—was exactly the promise made by the prophet Joel.

“Locusts” have been on a rampage. They think they’ve got the world in their mouths. But this eclectic, gathered group of “survivors” is enjoying the “first fruits” of *Shavuot*, the “first fruits” of a harvest that will never fail.

Acts 2:14–21

From the New Revised Standard Version

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

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¹⁵ “Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.

:::

¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

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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.

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¹⁹ ‘And I will show portents in the heavens above, and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and smoky mist.

:::

²⁰ ‘The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

∴

²⁰ 'Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Romans 8:14–23 (slightly abbreviated)

From the New Jerusalem Bible translation

¹⁴ All who are guided by the Spirit of God are children of God; ¹⁵ for what you received was not the spirit of slavery to bring you back into fear; you received the Spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry out, "Abba, Father!"

∴

¹⁶ The Spirit itself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God. ¹⁷ And if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, provided that we share his suffering, so as to share his glory....

∴

²² We are well aware that the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labor pains. ²³ And not only that: we too, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we are groaning inside ourselves, waiting with eagerness for our bodies to be set free....

For Discussion

In light of this week's other texts, what strikes you as significant about this passage from Romans?

Comment 21

In 1975, a pastor named James Manley, reflecting on the three passages that "intersected" for us today, wrote a prayer hymn with these words:

Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness—calling and free.

Spirit, Spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness—Wind, Wind on the sea!

*You moved on the waters, you called to the deep,
then you coaxed up the mountains from the valleys of sleep;*

*and over the eons, you called to each thing,
"Awake from your slumbers—and rise on your wing!"*

Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness—calling and free.

Spirit, Spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness—Wind, Wind on the sea!

*You swept through the desert, you stung with the sand,
and you gifted your people with the law and a land;
and where they were blinded with their idols and lies,
then you spoke through your prophets to open their eyes.*

Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness—calling and free.

Spirit, Spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness—Wind, Wind on the sea!

*You sang in a stable, you cried from a hill,
then you whispered in silence when the whole world was still;
and down in the city you called once again when you blew through your people on the rush of the wind.*

Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness—calling and free.

Spirit, Spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness—Wind, Wind on the sea!

*You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes,
from the bondage of sorrow the captives dream dreams,
our women see visions, our men clear their eyes,
with bold new decisions your people arise.*

Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness—calling and free.

Spirit, Spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness—Wind, Wind on the sea!