

October 27, 2019 “Comfort and Critique”

Homiletics, according to Webster, is the art of affable, ordinary conversation. Many of us would prefer something more than the ordinary! We wish we could be artists, or at least specially gifted in some way that would raise us above the crowd. We – and many other ordinary people as well – wish we were extraordinary. A good sermon is one in which a preacher puts ordinary conversation into affable form. The words are big, the ideas are small. We are lucky to have scripture to help us out, because most people are like me. We do not do very well at getting simple. We have an easier time staying above the ordinary. We even have good excuses: We are describing the extraordinary, which is to say, God’s actions in the world. However, here is the wonder and the good news of today’s text, right at the top: God comes in the ordinary. God comes as plague averted, full vats, and barns full of wheat. God comes via apocalypse, according to the prophet Joel. These are surely contradictory images for most of us. God comes any way God wants to come, in plenty or in fear. God comes, even when we do not understand the meaning, large and small, of God’s words. God comes in the ordinary, which includes the varied experience of human beings.

The prophet Joel makes only a brief appearance in the biblical drama, and even then he's shrouded in obscurity. All that we know about him comes from his micro-prophecy, but that's next to nothing since the entire book takes only about

five minutes to read. His name means “Yahweh is God.” He says he's the son of Pethuel, but that's no help since we know nothing about his father. His several references to the temple lead some readers to think that Joel lived in Jerusalem, but that's only conjecture. And the time of his prophecy is murky, with scholars suggesting dates as early as 835 BC and as late as 200 BC. Joel is a good example of the dual role that prophets played in the history of Israel.

First, Joel did more "forth-telling" about the present than "fore-telling" about the future. The business of the prophets was more prognosis than prediction. Prophets discerned with unusual clarity the significance of current events and the circumstances of God's people. Based upon their diagnosis, they spoke a word from God to provoke his people to change. By speaking God's word to our world, prophets call us to radical transformation.

He describes a locust plague that devastated the land, the economy and the people. Bark was stripped from trees, food vanished, seeds shriveled, granaries stood empty, cattle moaned from hunger and thirst, and streams evaporated into dry creek beds. With memories of the divine plagues of Moses, Joel interprets this natural disaster as a spiritual sign. It's a “day of the Lord,” a phrase he uses six times. Israel, he says, should understand the plague as a divine invitation to turn to Yahweh for redemption.

But the prophets did more than "forth-tell" God's judgment. They cast a positive vision for the people of God. The rains will return. The vats will overflow with new wine. The threshing floor will be filled with grain. "Your old men shall dream dreams," said Joel, "your young men will see visions." In addition to prophetic critique, the prophets offered pastoral comfort. They kept the dreams of God's people and his kingdom alive in times of disaster and discouragement.

Walter Brueggemann captures this dual role of the prophets nicely when he says that the prophets both criticized and energized. On the one hand, they disturbed the status quo. They questioned the reigning order of things. They viewed the normal state of affairs in a different light, and advocated a new way of seeing and living — personally, socially, spiritually, economically, politically, in short, in every dimension of life. The prophets afflicted the comfortable and the complacent.

But they also comforted the afflicted. They intended to "generate hope, affirm identity, and create a new future," says Brueggemann. They offered more than a negative critique; they were also about positive affirmation and encouragement. This is especially evident when Israel — God's elect! — was destroyed by the pagan nations of Assyria (722 BC) and Babylon (586 BC). How

could that happen? Didn't it suggest the failure of God's plan, the abandonment of his people?

When Israel was in exile, feeling forgotten by Yahweh, the prophets consoled them with hope. "Do not be afraid," says Joel. If you've ever felt despair over a hopeless situation, the prophets have a word for you. Yes, their words may seem bitter and harsh, but they also gave us honey for the heart.

Prophetic critique demands radical change. As in now. "Wake up!" writes Joel, "Weep! Wail! Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill." Don't wait another day. Prophetic critique calls for the question; it is rightly impatient for change.

Pastoral comfort is different; it invites us to patient endurance. When we witness what the psalmist calls "the turmoil of the nations" (65:7) — think Africa and Syria, Egypt and Iraq, we still believe that God is "the hope of all the ends of the earth, and of the farthest seas" (65:5). Despite all that we know, and the appearance of outward events, we keep waiting for him to "hear our prayers, answer us with awesome deeds, and still the roaring of the seas." (65:2, 5, 7).

Agitation for change and quiet persistence make awkward bedfellows. But we need both. I'd like to reflect on a particular Canadian politician: Bill Blaikie.

His life was impacted by Tommy Douglas – perhaps the greatest Canadian who ever lived. Bill Blaikie grew up in the 1960's in a strong United Church family, in the blue-collar corners of the city of Winnipeg. He was surrounded by NDP voters, without being conscious of the social gospel tradition, the connection between Christian activism and politics in Canada with roots among J.S. Woodsworth or Rev. Stanley Knowles.

It wasn't until later in life, when the war in Vietnam became an occasion for mass prophetic consciousness in creation, that he began to truly understand how prophetic faith and gospel tradition could both comfort and critique within his Christian tradition. He claims that the prophetic perspective is one that dares to imagine one's own side might be wrong, might be sinful, might be motivated by something other than what official propaganda tells us is the case. This didn't always come easy to a generation steeped in the righteousness of the Allied cause in World War II. It wasn't easy for the generation that fought World War II to have its children be cynical about the moral integrity of the world they had fought to create. But no one, least of all the prophets, ever said being prophetic is a pleasant or an easy business. It has to be done with love, rather than loathing. It has to offer comfort and not just critique; in a way that appeals to the best of a people's tradition rather than calling on them to abandon their traditions, but even then it is seldom welcome.

Bill studied at the Toronto School of Theology and United College (now the University of Winnipeg) and was ordained as a minister in the United Church of Canada. The Hon. Rev. Blaikie has also been a federal representative for ridings in the Winnipeg area for the NDP since 1979, including NDP House Leader, Parliamentary Leader, and Deputy Speaker of the House. He is the living testimony of prophetic vision where faith and politics go together, with faith informing politics and politics contextualizing faith.

But what does Bill Blaikie have to do with Joel and locusts? Now it may be difficult for us to imagine the impact of locusts swarming over and consuming every green tree, shrub and crop in Israel. Invasions of locusts still happen today, just as Bill faced them allegorically in House, but in Joel's time they were capable of eliminating a region's total food supply. This was a major disaster in the ancient world, and the Bible freely acknowledges the compelling force of locusts' disruptive power. Locusts became the eighth plague used by the Lord to bring about Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt.

When the people of Joel's community were decimated by the locust disaster, they were hard pressed to understand how God could allow such a tragedy to happen to them. Where is God, they must have wondered in the middle of such total devastation. This is the same question many people are asking today, as we

endure tragedies of every sort – personal, political, social, economic, AIDS, orphaned African children, homelessness, chemical warfare, violence in our schools, chronic unemployment, and ironically still today, incredible natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires and floods. If God is in the world for good, where is God when it seems like our whole world is falling down?

You see, it's important to hear the prophets in scripture, and amongst us now today, reminding us of how God is working to restore relationships with a straying people. We are people who have wandered away from the gospel tradition, who are suffering from stressors of all sorts that increase our anxiety and uncertainties. Prophets take ordinary circumstances and train of events and share it through affable, ordinary, faith-filled conversation. Do you hear the comfort of Joel, do you hear that God is with us in the messiness of our lives, or do you just hear the critique about how it's all going wrong? Or are you able to balance both comfort and critique and sustain or grow your faith? Are you able to see God, our help from ages past, our hope for years to come? Or are you plagued with locusts offering nothing hopeful, and you're constantly scared? What if God is about to do something good and we miss it, because we're too scared to look and hear the words of Good News?

This much is clear: the church and the world need both prophetic critique that demands change, and pastoral comfort on the long road of endurance. Amen.