

WGUMC November 22, 2015 Joel 2:18-27
"Surely God Has Done Great Things"

God is good! (All the time!) All the time! (God is good!)

That's really all I had to say today, so I think I'll sit down.

No wait, there's one more thing I could say. To quote the Prophet Joel: "Surely God has done great things!" But that may be hard for some folks to hear considering all that has happened in the past couple of weeks: a bomb on a plane in Egypt; an attack in Beirut, shootings in France, hostage-taking in Mali. If God is so good, why didn't God foil those attacks? Why didn't God save those people?

I suppose some crazy Christian will try to convince us that God is punishing them for falling away from the faith. Because isn't that what Joel is telling the people of Israel? That a plague of locusts is punishment for their sin?

In the first chapter, we read about a horrible plague of locusts that, like an army, has invaded the land. The insects are

as big as horses. They make a sound like the rumbling of chariots. They charge like warriors.

Are you creeped out yet? But this is not the script for a really bad movie. We're not primarily talking about monster bugs here. In the Book of Joel, the day of locusts is a warm-up for the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment.

But even though the trumpet has already sounded, it is not too late. All is not lost. "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." [Joel 2:12-13]

So you can see that in the Bible there is good precedence for blaming every bad thing that happens to us on God. God must be punishing us for something. But then my sermon title

would have to be, "Surely God has done very bad things" and that wouldn't have the same ring.

I certainly do not believe that God is punishing us with plagues of locusts or terrorists. God doesn't need to because we are perfectly capable of punishing ourselves. Take, for example, this plague of hot weather we've been having and this four-year drought we've been suffering. Now we can't say that they are the direct result of our environmental sins. But there is no denying the trend. Our climate is surely getting hotter and California will almost certainly get drier because we are bent on burning our way into oblivion. (The lake of fire in the Book of Revelation may not be just a metaphor much longer.)

But when the situation looks bleakest that is exactly when God's works prove to be greatest. Even at this late hour, all is not lost. Just look at what God did for the people of Israel after they came home from exile and saw nothing but devastation. When the people fasted, when they wept, when they returned

to God with all their hearts, God turned to them and had pity on them. God promised to send them grain and wine and oil because they had no provisions. God promised to turn back the army of locusts and drive them into the sea. God told the soil not to fear and the animals not to be afraid, because God would make the pastures green again. God would send the farmers abundant rain, both early and late, so that the threshing floors would be full of grain. "You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied and praise the name of the Lord your God who has dealt wondrously with you." Surely God has done great things.

Now look at what God has done for the people of California. The drought has dragged on and on. And it wasn't until this year, the fourth year, it wasn't until over 12 million trees had died, a half million acres of cropland had been fallowed, thousands of wells had gone dry, that state officials declared a fast and called us to repent of our water-wasting

ways. And much to everyone's surprise, we repented. We have reduced our water use by more than the 25% that the Governor demanded. Not only that, but for the first time, we have imposed limits on those who have had unlimited access to water, and we will actually start to measure how much we are pumping out of the ground so that we can be sure to put a sufficient amount back in the ground. What San Jose began to do in the 1930's and 40's, the rest of the state will be doing by 2020.

On the one hand, we're talking about regulation. But on the other hand, we're talking about a real transformation. When you think about how hard it is to change the behavior of one person, let alone 40 million people, this is nothing short of a miracle. A person of faith will look at this terrible drought and all the suffering that it has brought to plants, animals, and people and still be able to see what God has done to bring some good out of it. God didn't have to cause the drought in

order to use the drought to create in us a new heart and fix in us some new habits and give to us a new hope for our own salvation. Rain or no rain, our God has already done great things!

When I read the Book of Joel, this is the take-away for me: We don't have to look away from the terrible things that happen in life in order to hold onto our faith. If we want to grow in grace, we have to have the courage to look right into those situations because that's where we will see the great things that God is doing.

When I got the news that I had cancer, I wasn't as devastated as I thought I might be and everyone else thought I should be. I was hardly surprised, since my mother and younger sister have both had breast cancer. I spent about three days, between the phone call and the biopsy, coming to terms with the possibility that this cancer could kill me. I was three days in the tomb, but that was enough of that. I was more than ready

to be resurrected. By some amazing grace, I was filled with a peace that passes understanding and a faith that says that, dead or alive, I'll still be with God, and no matter what happens, God will bring something good out of this plague.

Six months later, I can say that God already has. Now that I've finished the radiation and my hair is starting to grow back, I want to share with you some of the great things that God has done in my life and in yours.

Personally, I have never been in better spiritual health than I've been in the last six months. I can honestly say that, by the grace of God, I have not spent even one hour being afraid of dying. In fact, I have never spent more time being grateful for living.

In many ways, my life has improved with cancer. I have been forced to slow down and that's not a bad thing. When you slow down, you can savor things. I have been stopping work sooner and going to bed earlier. And in addition to

surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, I have embarked on a course in tree therapy. I have spent hours and hours in the redwoods, praying to God and listening to trees. I have written down thoughts that somehow came to me and then thanked God when my words were shared widely. Throughout it all, I have felt that Christ has been before and behind me, above and below me, and wherever I was going, I knew that Christ would be right there beside me.

If I have a fear in going forward, it is the fear that I will get so far away from the cancer that I will forget these great things that God has done in me and go right back to moving too fast, working too hard, sleeping too little and squeezing out the precious room I have made in my life for life and for joy and thanksgiving.

If I have a concern about my work here, it is the concern that I will unlearn the lesson that a summer of treatment has hammered home for me: that you are a spiritually-gifted

congregation and that if I will only get out of your way, you'll get about the business of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

It's too bad that it took getting cancer for me to know your real potential as ministers in this community. Over the past several months, some of you have preached. Some have provided pastoral care. Some of you said prayers and sent cards or made hats or made meals. Some of you went to Mexico to build houses. Some of you stayed here and repaired God's house. Some of you befriended those who have no house.

All summer long, I have been giving thanks for a UMW that goes to the Women's Gathering Place and for a Building Hope team that put on a barbecue for the homeless. And even now, I give thanks for the faith collaborative that has been meeting here to work on winter shelter.

And the thanksgivings don't stop there. I shamelessly used the cancer to recruit some volunteers that we've needed

for a long time. Some of you signed up to usher or to work in the garden. Some of you took on helping us prepare for worship and some of you are reimagining the practice of stewardship. Some of you were companions to those who walked to Emmaus and some of you are companions for me because you, too, have walked through chemotherapy.

I can't even name all the great things that God has done in you and in me. But I know this: now matter what you are doing, no matter how much you are going through, it is life-giving to take the time for thanksgiving. You don't have to have hours and hours to walk through the redwoods. I am well aware that most jobs don't let you do that. But every one of us has a moment in every day that we can say this and this really is all we need to say: God is good. All the time. Thanks be to God!