

The Prophets 2: The Color of Salvation is Green
Joel 2: 21-27
July 14
Todd Smith Lippert

I told my wife Sara that the AC was out and it was going to be hot on Sunday, and she said, “keep the sermon short,” and sighed, like she didn’t have much hope.

This is our second week with the Biblical Prophets. Duke Divinity School scholar Ellen Davis’ is our guide. Davis says that “in word and deed, the prophets interpreted the faith for their time, and equally, they interpreted the times for the faithful.” Last week we heard the prophets speaking to our migration crisis, and this we will hear the prophets speaking to our ecological and climate crises.

I was getting in my car on Tuesday, and I received a phone call from Matthew Fitzgerald. Matthew graduated from Carleton about five years ago, and when he was a student he attended worship here. He helped us as our ISAIAH work was beginning. Not long ago, his dad died after a battle with cancer, and he has since taken over his family’s organic farm near Hutchinson. We both got our bluetooth devices connected so that we could honor the new hands free cell phone law, and started talking.

“Is it raining there,” I said. “It’s raining here.” Matthew said, “I just stepped out of the tractor because of the rain. I can’t work in the field any longer because of the rain.” Then he said, “climate change is real. We are seeing it every week. Our climate is getting wetter and wetter, it makes it hard for us to work the fields as much as we need to as an organic farm.” He went on to tell me about crops he grows, black beans that Chipotle uses in their burritos,

organic wheat that Annie's uses for boxed macaroni and cheese, organic peas that will be used for the new Impossible Burger.

It was revealing to me that as I talked with a young person whose livelihood is dependent upon the land, the first words out of his mouth were about climate change. That was where the conversation started, and once we had talked that through, we could go on to other things.

Davis says, "Perhaps the most urgent, fresh, and indeed surprising message that the biblical prophets speak to contemporary society concerns the God-given integrity of the created order and how it is disrupted through the ungodly, disorderly, actions of humans."

The prophets knew that human beings and the created order were all interconnected. In general, they were rural people, and they lived in a time when it was difficult to forget that as human beings we are deeply dependent upon the land and water for our survival. But there was more to it for the prophets. As the prophets understood the covenant between God and Israel, the land and creation were so interconnected with the people, that Davis and other scholars are suggesting that we should think about the Covenant not as a two way relationship between God and Israel, but as a three way relationship between God, Israel, and Creation. God can't be in relationship with Israel, with the people, without being in relationship with the creation too. The same is true for Israel. Israel can't be in relationship with God without being in relationship with creation too.

Much of the time, this link between the creation and the people is just assumed but there are times where we see this expressed clearly. For example, the prophets believed that when you mistreated the poor, that was a violation of the covenant with God, and that then caused

drought and desolation of the land. We don't believe that is true now, but we are discovering that the opposite is true. When we mistreat the land and creation, it is the poorest among us who suffer first and who suffer most. Scholar Hilary Marlow points out that this may be two ways of saying the same thing, that the world is an interconnected whole and we ignore it at our own peril."

Not only do the prophets assume that human beings and non-human creation are part of an interconnected whole, they often express how God is in relationship with more than humanity, they will speak about non-human creation being alive and acting.

Our passage from the Prophet Joel for today is from chapter 2. Chapter 1 is an account of a locust infestation that has been destructive like a war. Joel vividly talks about how the locusts have taken it all down just like it was a war. And Joel places humanity and the rest of creation on increasingly equal footing. He writes;

The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off

From the house of the Lord.

The priests mourn,

The ministers of the Lord.

The fields are devastated,

The soil mourns;

For the grain is destroyed,

The wine dries up,

The oil fails.

The priests are unable to fulfill their holy work, and they are mourning. And the soil, like the priests is unable to fulfill its holy work, and the soil mourns. The soil grieves, like it has heart and soul.

In chapter 2, there is a call to repentance, a call to return to right relationship in the covenant, and a reaffirmation of God's grace and mercy and steadfast love.

Then there's a vision of restoration, of salvation. God responds to the people saying, "I will send you grain, wine, and oil." Then there's our passage for today, where God gives a message of assurance for the soil and animals:

Do not be afraid, O soil! Rejoice and be glad, for Yahweh has done something great.

Do not be afraid, O animals of the field! For the pastures of the wilderness are in grass,

For the trees bears its fruit.

For the prophet Joel, the soil, the animals, the trees, are all in relationship with God too. God seeks their restoration, just like God seeks the restoration of the people. We prayed Psalm 36 earlier and the Psalmist expresses the same thing, "you save humans and animals alike."

Davis points out a takeaway for us. She says, "Always and everywhere, God is involved on both "sides" of the ceaseless work of redemption. The renewal of creation involves the remaking of human society, and human society is entirely dependent upon the preservation, repair, and renewal of creation."

That is an extremely important sentence: The renewal of creation involves the remaking of human society, and human society is entirely dependent upon the preservation, repair, and renewal of creation.

The prophets know this, and they hand this insight to us as a gift in a time of ecological crisis. Right relationship with one another includes right relationship with all of creation. We can't separate one from the other. It just doesn't work. As we find a better relationship with one another and a better relationship with creation, we are on an increasingly holy path. To put it in very Biblical terms, we are repenting and repairing the covenant God makes with Noah, Noah's family, and every living creature that is with them.

May the witness of the prophets shape our living, and may we shape the world we touch.

Amen.