

Still Relevant, December 6, 2020, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Joel 2.12-13, 28-29; Luke 11.13

Prayer

There was a moment a few months back that still haunts me. I was sitting at the food court in the mall with the young catechists from the church after a Sunday service. The usually packed food court was almost completely empty of patrons. Several restaurants had shut down entirely. People were anxiously avoiding getting even within a few feet of anybody else.

This was early March. The pandemic was just ramping up (for the *first* wave).

What was so eerie about it was that this scene was exactly like the beginning of so many dystopian movies I'd seen. When the malls are empty and the streets cease being busy, you can just *feel* that something is seriously wrong.

I love dystopian fiction. Something about it is just so riveting. It's not just the imagination that's triggered by indulging in good dystopian fiction—it's not just a fanciful escape. More often these dystopian fictions are a commentary on the world we are *currently* living in—and a warning to prevent this nightmare from becoming reality.

At that moment in the food court, it felt as though the nightmare was starting. It was scary.

When you watch this stuff, you don't always know what the culprit will be. Sometimes it's something scary but believable: Chemical or nuclear war; a political uprising perhaps. Sometimes it's a little less believable: aliens; monsters of some kind.

One show I've been hooked on for a long time involves zombies. You're probably reacting the way my wife does every time she sees me watching it: eyes rolling, big sigh. How could I watch something so far-fetched and ridiculous?

What is most interesting to me about this show—and good dystopian fiction, are two moments in the storyline: first, the moment where things really start to fall apart. That mall food court scene where you can just *feel* that there is a major problem (and it might not be apparent to everyone else yet). And second, that moment, much later (and it doesn't often happen in short stories or movies) when the characters have moved *beyond* the initial disaster that brought them to this point and *they are trying to put the pieces together again*. What does the world look like after a nuclear disaster? How does society re-configure itself when an evil alien has killed off 50% of all life forms? How will people get along *with other people* when there are literal monsters prowling in the streets?

In the show I watch, (yes, the one with the zombies), there is a character who is a priest. He's a conflicted character (and I won't get into the details as to why), but what is interesting to me (and not only because I, too, am a priest) is that he is *still* a priest, even after the world has fallen apart. He still wears his clerical collar. He still describes himself as a priest, and he even maintains some priestly functions in this new zombie-filled world.

Why is that interesting?

Well, it means that at least for this character, God still has a role to play in this new world. The event/tragedy (in this case, the zombie apocalypse) didn't make God irrelevant. Unnecessary.

Superfluous. And that's saying something. Often, in dystopian fiction, *all* religion is passé. And that is understandable, really, depending on what you believe. Hear me out here: if you believe in a deity whose whole role is to protect you from a major disaster, then would you continue to believe in that deity *after* that major disaster? I'm not talking about a tsunami or an earthquake or a flood—but a catastrophic earth-changing event. What does it mean to believe in a God who supposedly created the entire world with us humans as its caretakers if that world is taken-over and destroyed by an alien life-force? Did God make the aliens, too? Then, what of us?

It may seem like maybe I just have too much time on my hands to have considered all this. But bear with me.

If everything we have always understood as “just the way it is” is completely changed, then wouldn't it make sense to question what we've always *believed*? And if a group of people can band together and survive a zombie apocalypse and marauding murdering humans and *still* believe that God has a role in their lives, then isn't that saying something profound about faith? About God's role in it all?

Usually, if you're watching one of these movies (or living through a major cultural shift), the preachers who are still alive afterward have only one thing to say: “this is all your fault. God is punishing you.” And people have had that question during this latest pandemic. “What did we do to deserve this?” “Why is God punishing us?” And there have even been people who have been willing to step forward with suggestions. With *supernatural causes* for this disaster. Specific sins that brought it about. Their answers now are just as unhelpful when the same reasons were given for causing hurricanes, earthquakes, typhoons, and the AIDS crisis in the past.

But for those of us in the midst of a pandemic (as we all are), and also for the people living in the time of the prophet Joel, the question of “how do we relate to God” is very real. How do we continue to approach God where everything is different? For Joel's audience, the context is a coming plague of locusts. For an agrarian society, an “army” of locusts is the apocalypse. It spells disaster. How does one worship God when one's very livelihood is taken away? What do you pray for when the crops have all died? When there is no more food? When you can't feed your children—when *everyone* can't feed their children? For Joel's audience, this was no mere “tough year”. The kind of destruction Joel was describing meant annihilation. Or, at the very least, wholesale devastation.

And for us. What do we do when our whole lives have been turned upside down? How do we worship God together when we can't get together at all. How do we worship? How do we gather? How do we pray together? Is this one of those “time to re-evaluate everything” moments? Has this crisis negated the need for God in our lives? Has God let us down by permitting this pandemic to ravage our population as it has already (and will do even more in the months ahead)?

How do we (how *can* we) respond to God at Christmas when that very likely means staying home? No celebrations. No family. No lighting candles and singing carols at church.

Where is God in all of this?

“Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”

Does anyone feel like mourning these days? Like weeping? I know that our family has all been affected by this pandemic and by the uncertainty that greets everyday. By the compromises and the challenges and the difficulties. And we've had it good! Nobody is sick! We still have jobs. Daycare. School. And yet I still feel like mourning. Like weeping. That something is not right here.

The prophet Joel writes to his people that even in their hardship—even in their paradigm-changing circumstances, God is still calling for their return. To come before the Lord with broken hearts. Not put-together in our Sunday Best. As we are. Broken. Disappointed.

And God makes promises for what will happen—for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

God gives us hope: there is yet more to come. Our God is gracious and merciful. Abounding in steadfast love.

In the gospel, Jesus reminds us to pray fervently to God, knowing that God, who is good, will give even the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

How do we worship God when we can't enter the church? How can we pray when we can't be together?

Honestly. Truthfully. With mourning. In our frustration. In our anger. In our confusion and anxiety.

Because even in these uncertain times, God is still there. And God still has a role in our lives. God is still looking to pour out the Holy Spirit on us—if only we ask faithfully and fervently.

Help us, O God, in these trying times. Meet us in the places where we are able to worship you, wherever that may be. Heal our broken hearts. And fix this mess!

Lord Jesus, come soon.