

Sermon (10/23/16, Joel 2: 23-32):

When I was young, it was a lot easier to convince myself I could be extraordinary. Making that kind of leap was still doable. Visions of grandeur were visions that were still worthy of my reach - to attain new heights of greatness, to do amazing things, to be part of tomorrow's technological revolution which I mostly heard about from Walt himself on the Wonderful World of Disney!

Someday, I would think, I will do extraordinary things, accomplish extraordinary achievements, leave my mark in extraordinary ways.

It is the special gift of being a child. Our imaginations are not yet chained to the realistic. We have not yet felt the bumps and bruises of life's true struggle. We have not yet experienced the hard complications of navigating the many detours, dead ends, and washed out paths that get in our way along this path called life. We have not yet known the tenuous nature life has, often making it feel like a dangerous tight-rope walk.

I have to confess that this is one of those Sundays when I wish I could be extraordinary. We have grown accustomed to calling it Stewardship Sunday...that day in the year when the church again begs us to take seriously the gifts we designate to the life and well-being of the church's work. I say 'beg' because I am sure that's the way it sounds and feels sometimes.

I wish I could be extraordinary when looking at the empty canvas of blank pages on my computer screen wondering what words I could use, what thoughts I could convey, what dreams I could paint that would convince you of the joy that comes with supporting the work of the church. I wish I could be extraordinary as I try to describe the hopes God continues to have for us as his beloved followers. I wish I could be extraordinary so I might

convince you that this day is something so much more than just a necessary evil.

It is, I think, one of the reasons I finally relented to this call of Ministry that God wouldn't let me shake off. As a young person, often feeling out of place in other work venues, the hope to leave my mark and use my gifts in a way that would make a difference remained strong. Eventually, I saw the church as a good venue for this kind of accomplishment. It had, for me, far greater potential than political aspirations, fame, fortune, or any of those other normal things we tend to associate with what extraordinary looks like. This is not to say that using our gifts in other ways is not a good and important thing but it is a reminder that we should not underestimate the church's potential to be a powerful agent of change and hope in the world.

So, while I pine to be extraordinary and while you might have similar stirrings, today's text from Joel reminds us of the power of the ordinary, especially when placed in the hands of God.

It's difficult to know exactly what the context was of Joel's world, but it's fair to assume that something horrific had happened. It seems that his people had recently experienced an horrific attack from a devouring swarm of locusts. Their food source and livelihood had been utterly wiped out. It also seems that this continued for more than just a single season but for a number of seasons.

I have heard of this strange phenomenon and seen film clips of it. To be sure, it's something that would feel right at home in a horror movie!

With their crops devastated, hunger and desperation ran rampant among the people whom Joel spoke to.

Just prior to today's passage these defeated people were called

by Joel to return to God; to enter a time of lament and repentance; to seek God and renew their relationship with the Holy. They were invited to do so in the knowledge that God is not one to be feared because ‘God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.’

While we are not told this directly, something must have clicked. The sincerity of their search seemed to lead them in a new direction. God responded with grace. God’s responded with restoration.

Like ripples in a pond, one act of restoration leads to another. First the land is saturated with an early rain. It poured down, washing clean the devastation wrought by the locust invasion. The early rains then led to the early growth of crops...tender shoots popping through the dirt – quickly growing, flourishing, and reaping abundance. Soon the threshing floors were full and the vats overflowed with wine and oil.

The people upon which these rains fell were ordinary folks like you and me. This amazing grace of God was experienced by everyone including those who must have convinced themselves they were insignificant, worthless, and somehow deserving of God’s wrath.

The pond’s ripples of grace expand. ‘My people,’ God declares, ‘shall never again be put to shame.’

Ah, the power, the devastating power of shame...it eats away at us like those locusts devouring stalks of grain and corn. It is merciless, leaving little behind for us to hang our sense of worth on.

Like bullies on a playground, we can only imagine the laughing stock that God’s people had become. Other nations taunted them saying, ‘Where is your God now? Some powerful

God you have!’

We know these types of bullies. Sometimes they are even the voices within our own head convincing us that the devastating self-images we see in our mind’s mirror is the truth of who we really are.

‘Never again shall my people be put to shame.’ Both they and others will know who they really are...God’s Beloved, the ones for whom the rains fall, the threshing floors fill, the vats overflow; the ones for whom Christ came to find, to save, to redeem, to love.

‘You will know that I, the Creator of all that is, is in the midst of you.’ Not distant, not aloof, not unaffected by your tears, not cold and calculating, not filled with anger and wrath...but in the midst of you. Where we live. Where we struggle. Where we walk. Where we labor. ‘Never again will you be put to shame.’

The ripples of grace continue to expand -this time with words that would be repeated on the day of Pentecost by Peter, another one who was about as ordinary and unremarkable as they come. Peter-an uneducated fisherman and a prime example of one who suffers, like me, from foot-in-mouth disease. Yet, it was into Peter’s hands and people just like him that Jesus placed the hope of the world.

‘Then afterwards,’ God declares, ‘I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions, even on the male and female slaves I will pour out my Spirit.’

These words are stunningly remarkable given the audience that Joel shared them with as well as the audience Peter spoke to. In a patriarchal world where women and children had few rights and in a world where slavery was the accepted norm, the inclusiveness of God’s Spirit is stunning.

In our own day and age, I am particularly struck by the promise of sons and daughters prophesying. I hear often the sadness in parents' voices as they speak of children who have little to no interest in the church. I think of those children in our own community whom I seldom see once confirmation is achieved. When all is said and done, our passage reminds us of our dependence on the Spirit to not only bring them home to this place but to also use them to challenge us with the needed ministries of the age.

'Your old men shall dream dreams.' Like I said, it was a lot easier to imagine I could be extraordinary when I was young. As the years of challenge, demand, and realism pile up such imaginings get harder to come by. How wonderful it is to think that, with the Spirit's help, those days of great imaginings are not behind me. How wonderful it is to think that you and I, even those of us who are tempted to think that our time has come and gone, still possess a God given purpose hidden in the sunrise not the sunset. How wonderful it is to be reminded that the Spirit does not segregate between the has-beens and those in their prime.

When it comes to the building of God's dream, all of us have an essential stake and it is that essential stake we are being asked to consider today as we reflect upon how we will invest ourselves in the life of the church.

I know, maybe the word wonderful feels a little, well, underwhelming. We were kind of hoping it was someone else's turn to take a crack at this extraordinary thing. We were kind of hoping to retire and let go of those all too demanding reigns. We were kind of hoping we could stay out of the way while someone else is saddled with the care of this place and this work God has called holy.

Yet, I ask you to consider this. The character of God seems to choose, again and again, the ordinary to do the extraordinary. The character of God seems to circumvent the assumption of choosing only the ones with the most to give including those with the most smarts, the most energy, the most gifts, the most resources, and the most connected. For some reason that only the Spirit understands, God chooses the seemingly ordinary and maybe even less than ordinary, to be a powerful ripple of grace in this all too scary pond of reality.

It's a challenging thought to consider in this time when we believe that all things hinge on an election that will take place in a few weeks. An election that has generated much concern among us-setting neighbor against neighbor, citizen against citizen, and evoking a kind of unprecedented angry divisiveness in our country. Now don't get me wrong, it really is an important election and it is something we must all take seriously and it is something I urge all of you to think long and hard on. Please don't stay home on Election Day. It is what people of faith are called to do with utmost seriousness.

None the less, I hope you will also consider, when casting your vote on the future of the church by filling out your estimated giving card, that what we do here is no small and inconsequential matter either. In fact, God has a long history, even longer than that of *any* nation, of using the ordinary, even the apparent less than ordinary, to do the extraordinary.

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.