

Proper 25, Year C  
Joel 2: 23-32  
October 28, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, California

Responding to God's Promise:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Do you remember the Stephen Sondheim song, "Send in the Clowns"?  
Do you remember the chorus?

It goes like this:

Isn't it rich?  
Aren't we a pair?  
Me here at last on the ground,  
You in mid-air.  
Send in the clowns.

I've felt caught in that stanza this week—on the ground and in mid-air—

- \*on the ground, in a week of devastating wildfires in Southern California;
- \*on the ground, in a week when a child has been shot here in Sonoma;
- \*on the ground, in a week when the sabers of war seem to be rattling again;
- \*on the ground, with folks facing foreclosures on their homes;
- \*on the ground, with all the messiness and crankiness of daily life.

On the ground—and yet in mid-air as well—

- \*in mid-air as we as a community celebrate the successful completion of the calling process and the end of a time of question marks in the life of Trinity Sonoma and Tim's and my life as well;
- \*in mid-air as we begin to develop a body of shared experiences and the language of shared memories held together by the glue of shared laughter;
- \*in mid-air as I see the many gifts people bring to this community and begin to get a sense of our rich potential;
- \*in mid-air as we experience our community of Sonoma coming together in a time of tragedy.

The prophet Joel speaks from a moment such as this—a moment very much on the ground; and a moment filled with the promise of mid-air and the possibilities such moments bring.

To the people of Jerusalem, a people who have experienced tremendous devastation; to a people for whom joy has withered away as they witness cutting, swarming, hopping and destroying locust consume their crops and swallow up their stores of grain; to a people who have seen everything they have worked for disappear, the prophet Joel says, “Be glad.”

“Be glad.” How can he say this? Aren’t the words “be glad” in such a context tantamount to cheap grace? Yet nonetheless Joel says, “Be glad.”

To the people of Jerusalem—a people very much on the ground, the prophet Joel offers a vision—a mid-air kind of vision. What a vision it is—a vision of hillsides turned green, granaries chock full of grain, vats of wine and oil filled to the brim. The needs of Israel met and surpassed. It’s a vision, a promise really, of abundance. A promise sealed by the outpouring of God’s spirit on all flesh—insiders and outsiders, men and women, old and young, free and slave.

This vision, this promise, offers us as it offered the people of Jerusalem, a challenge. Inherent in the promise are two questions, “How shall we respond to God’s promise of abundance?” “What shall we do with God’s abundant gifts?”

Throughout the Bible, the answer to the first question, is always the same. “Trust in the promise.” To Abraham and Sarah, to Moses, to Joseph sent into slavery, to Mary, and even to Jesus on the cross, God says, “Trust in the promise of God.” As the prophet Joel says to the people of Jerusalem experiencing devastation, drought, and deprivation, “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love....”(Joel 2: 13) “Trust in God’s promise,” he might well have said.

If we trust in God’s promise—even in those moments when we are mired on the ground, even in the midst of our suffering—we can live differently. We can begin to release divisive fear that can rust and corrode a life. We can turn from operating on a model of scarcity to operating on a model of abundance. We can turn from looking at what we cannot do to looking at what we can do. We can begin to embrace

the possibilities the moment offers for the moment always offers possibilities. We can be generous for we know that God is generous.

How shall we respond to God's promise of abundance? Trust in the promise.

But there's a second question inherent in this vision the prophet Joel offers us. Joel tells us that God promises, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." Those are gifts—gifts from God. What are we to do with them?

We are to use them. We are to use the gifts God has given us—whether they be dreaming dreams, seeing visions, prophesying or any one of a number of other gifts God has given—for the work God has given us to do.

How shall we respond to God's promise of abundance? What are we to do with God's abundant gifts? Trust in the promise and use the gifts. That is our work—wherever we are—on the ground or in mid-air.