

I

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to Israel and the West Bank with a group of pastors from Fort Worth. When it came time to fly home, the moment we departed our hotel in Jerusalem for the Tel Aviv airport, I started a timer, and the moment I walked through the door of my house in Texas, I stopped it. The total elapsed travel time was a little more than 31 hours. The jet lag was brutal, and it felt like it took a couple of days for my brain to catch up with the rest of my body after I got home.

II

We've all been there, haven't we? We've all had moments in our lives where our bodies might be physically in one place, but our heads and hearts are somewhere else. Maybe it's not jetlag that caused that disconnect. Maybe our mind is on a pressing deadline at work or at school. Maybe we're distracted with worry about a family member or friend or we're focused on the latest thing in the news. Maybe, for whatever reason, we're just checked out. But we've all been in that place where our bodies are physically present, but our hearts and minds are not. And that brings us to our story for today.

III

This fall, we've been doing an overview of the Old Testament, and I promise, we're going to get to Mary and Joseph and Bethlehem and the manger very soon. But when we come to our

story for today, it's still about 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Between where we left off last week in the Book of Daniel and where we pick up this morning in the Book of Joel, the Babylonian Empire has fallen to the Persians.

When the Persians come to power, they release the people of God from their bondage in Babylon, and they begin to return to the Land of Promise. But their capital city of Jerusalem is a shell of its former glory. The city that once had 25,000 inhabitants now has a population of about 1,500. There is no king of Judah on the throne in the palace, and even if the people wanted to worship, the Temple still lies in ruins, and because the land has been economically devastated, they have nothing to offer God anyway. Or so they think.

And it's into that context that the prophet Joel speaks. So listen now for a Word from God from Joel 2:12-13 and 28-29.

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

Then afterward 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. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

IV

Perhaps these words from the prophet Joel were the inspiration behind the pop Christmas song, “All I Want for Christmas is You.”

Because what God wants cannot be purchased at any price. What God wants cannot be ordered off the Internet and shipped in time for Christmas. What God wants is more than anything else in call creation is your whole heart.

And maybe for you, that’s no problem. Maybe you wholeheartedly and willingly give your whole self to God. Maybe your daily walk with Christ is bearing the spiritual fruit of patience and gentleness and generosity and self-control.

Or maybe for you, your relationship with God these days is “complicated.” Lord knows that this has been a hard year for you. Between the pandemic and the election and the economy and all the chaos that this year has brought, to say nothing of the fact that worship and Sunday School and fellowship opportunities have been moved online or suspended outright for nine months and counting, it stands to reason that you might have become a little distracted when it comes to matters of faith.

Or maybe it’s not all that complicated. Maybe you simply find it hard to believe that God could possibly

want anything to do with you. Maybe you look around at all these people around you who seem to have it all figured out when it comes to matters of faith and you think to yourself, “What am I even doing here? If they really knew me, if they really knew about my past, if they really knew how I’ve been struggling so much, they’d kick me to the curb faster than you can say Kris Kringle.”

Maybe you think that it’s too late for you, and that you really can’t go home again.

And if that’s you, let me tell you a story. It’s not my story, mind you, but it’s a story that Jesus told his friends about what the kingdom of God is like. A father had two sons whom he loved deeply and fiercely. The father had worked hard and had been good with his funds, and so he had accumulated some assets that one day he would pass down to his children. But one day the older boy came to his father and said, “I really don’t care for the way you do things around here, and I don’t care to stay. So just give me my inheritance now, and I’ll be on my way.”

As much as it broke the father’s heart to see his son walk away, he did as his son asked. He gave him his inheritance, and the boy left. The boy went off to the far country, where he spent his entire fortune on wine, women, and song. And soon, he was out of money, and he was flat broke. He was so broke and desperate that he ended up living for a time with some pigs. But one

morning, he came to his senses. He decided that he would go home and beg his father for mercy, hoping that maybe he could hire on in the fields so at least he would have enough to eat. So he set off for home.

But while he was still a long way away, his father spotted him coming down the lane. And the father *ran* to his son, and even though he stunk to high heaven, the father wrapped that boy in a bear hug and squeezed him so tight he thought his veins might pop. Then the father called to his household and told them to prepare a steak dinner. He got some clean clothes for the boy and put a ring on his finger, and he called the whole village to come and celebrate, because his boy had come home.

That's what God is like, my friend. You and I, we wander off to the far country. You and I, we get distracted by all kinds of things and turn from following God's ways in the world. But when we come to our senses, when we return to God, when we rend our hearts, God doesn't look at us and say, "Well, it's about time." God doesn't look at us and say, "Well, I hope you learned your lesson." God doesn't look at us and say, "Shame on you, and by the way, you stink."

No, my friend. That's not what God is like. God is like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal child home. God is like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Yet even now, there is no sin of yours that is beyond God's forgiving. Yet even now, there is nowhere you can go that is beyond the reach of God's mercy and grace. Yet even now, there is no death of yours that is beyond God's resurrecting. Yet even now, despite all that has happened, despite all the distractions, yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart.

V

This has been a year that we won't soon forget. But as 2020 draws to a close, we naturally begin peering into 2021, and wondering what life will be like. When will the vaccines be widely available? When will we be able to stop wearing masks? When will we get back to normal around here?

Those are important questions to be sure. But for we who claim the name of Christ, for we who have been bound together in this thing we call the church, the prophet Joel has something bigger to offer than a glimpse into 2021.

The prophet Joel tells us that for those who center themselves on God, God will give them a glimpse of the future kingdom of God here and now. Those who center themselves on God, those who will allow the Spirit to be poured out on them, will see a glimpse today of what the future coming of the kingdom of God holds in store.

A glimpse of a day when death will be no more.

A glimpse of a day when
mourning and crying and pain will be no
more.

A glimpse of a day when poverty
and hunger will be no more.

A glimpse of a day when racism
will be no more.

A glimpse of a day when the lion
and the lamb will lie down together, a
day when the oppressed and the
oppressor will break bread together, and
they will not hurt or destroy one another
on God's holy mountain.

A glimpse of a day when all shall
be well, all shall be well, all manner of
things shall be well.

Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your heart.

Then afterward 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. Even on the male
and female slaves, in those days, I will
pour out my spirit.

Thanks be to God. Amen.