

KEY POINT

God's people are reminded of their reason for hope- God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, steadfast in love, and relenting from punishing. Because God is at work in these ways, a time will come when God's Spirit will be accessible to all.

KEY VERSE

Joel 2:28

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.

Advent

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FAITH FORMATION FOR CHILDREN | YOUTH | FAMILY | ADULT

Week 2 of Advent - Come into our Hopelessness!

OPENING PRAYER

Begin your time together with this, or another, prayer:

Gracious and merciful God, you call us always closer to you. Be with us as we study together. Help us to hear your voice in the words of Scripture and of one another. Turn us always toward your light, so that we might better reflect it to the world. In your name. Amen.

READ

Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

ABOUT THE STORY

After the people of Israel were allowed to return to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon, they worked to rebuild the city and their temple. The atmosphere was far different from the pre-exile days. Where once there had been a thriving city of 25,000 people at the heart of a kingdom, now Jerusalem has barely 1,500 inhabitants, and no king at all.

The region of Judah had been conquered by the Babylonians and is now a subject to the Persian Empire. A series of prophets arose in this period, including Ezra, Nehemiah, Joel, and Malachi. The exact dates for the Book of Joel are uncertain, but it is clear that Jerusalem has been rebuilt and at peace. However, the land is suffering under a devastating plague of locusts. As the fields are stripped bare, famine threatens. Joel sees this as a sign of God's displeasure, and takes the plague of locusts as an opportunity to call the people to repentance.

The text never makes clear exactly what the sins of the people are; however, Joel's name may give us a hint. "Joel" literally means, "Yahweh (the Lord) is God." The people of Israel made a covenant at Mount Sinai and promised to have no other gods besides Yahweh. Joel's name may be an indication that the people have failed to keep this covenant, perhaps worshipping gods that they encountered in their exile.

In the verses we read today, Joel speaks in the voice of God, calling on the people to repent, literally "to return" to their covenant. Joel uses traditional images of mourning and repentance, including fasting, weeping, and the tearing of clothing. It is important to note that this is not intended to be only an emotional display. In the ancient Hebrew understanding, the heart was not the seat of the emotional life. It was where the intellect and the will were housed, much as we might use "the head" or "the mind" today. Thus, what is being called for is a complete turning over of one's self to God.

The goal of this repentance is the long-awaited “day of the Lord” which is mentioned in verse 31. Verses 28-29 describe how in that day, God will effect a great reversal for all people, drawing all of creation back into God’s ways.

SHARE

- Name a time when you put your whole heart into a project or a relationship. What happened when your commitment wavered? How did your level of commitment affect the outcome?
- If you were on the receiving end of Joel’s words, how do you imagine you would feel? Comforted? Frightened? Encouraged?
- What message for today do you hear in these words that were written for a community nearly 2,400 years ago?

PRAY

Steadfast God, thank you for your promises of mercy and grace. Help us to keep our hearts turned always toward you, so we might be vessels of your mercy for those we encounter this week. In your name. Amen.

BLESS

Share this verbal blessing with one another: God bless you and keep you. Amen.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION AT HOME:

- Keep a dream journal, writing down your dreams as soon as you wake up. Use them as a starting point for daily devotions. How might God be speaking to you in your dreams?
- If you are in good health, try fasting for a day, even if only from sunup to sundown. Spend some of the time and money you save in a way that deepens your faith life, perhaps volunteering, praying, reading Scripture, feeding those in need, or participating in other giving activities.
- Pray as you read the newspaper. Lift up victims, perpetrators, and others mentioned, wondering with God about where repentance might be called for.