

**The Possibility Business—Part 2:
“What Are You Looking For”**

OT 30C

Joel2: 23-32

Luke 18: 9-14

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The Possibility Business—Part 2:
“What Are You Looking For?”

If Dr. Seuss had been charged with writing for the prophet Joel, the beginning of his book would go something like, “Locusts. Locusts. Locusts. Locusts here. Locusts there. Locusts destroying things everywhere.”

But in actuality, the book of the prophet begins with this:

*What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.*

It’s far from obvious amid our suburban pews, but a plague of locusts like this meant complete disaster for the nation of Israel. Still very much an agrarian society, Israel’s economy was based on agriculture. So when this plague of locusts passed through destroyed not just some but essentially all of their crops, it not only meant the people had lost their primary source of food; they’d lost the fuel for their economy.

The cries went out. “What will we eat?”

The worries were fierce. “Will we *ever* recover?”

They hadn’t been prepared for a disaster like this.

They didn’t know what to do. They didn’t know where to turn.

It was if, just like that, the lights went out.

Just like that, hope was extinguished.

Just like that, Israel could no longer rest at night. They couldn’t picture tomorrow’s sunrise, because the possibilities of a better tomorrow had just... evaporated. All they could see... wherever they turned... were problems.

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It might remind you of some of the stories we hear today emanating from places devastated by either natural and manmade disaster. The Bahamas. Syria. Sudan. Yemen. Haiti. New Orleans.

It was about 10 years ago that a group of folks in a church I previously served went down to New Orleans on a mission trip. Hurricane Katrina had destroyed the area three years prior, but the city was still rebuilding. So the group went down to participate in the ongoing efforts. They slept and ate in a local church, spending their days working on area homes that’d been destroyed.

From their description of it, it reminded me a lot of how Habitat for Humanity operates, as outside groups will fund and work on rebuilding a home, as long as the resident of that home participates in some of the rebuilding themselves.

I asked Bill, who'd gone on the trip, if he could share some of the highlights.

"Well, it was rewarding in a lot of ways," he said. "It felt good to help people rebuild. A lot of them were just so grateful, so excited that they were finally, after three years, getting their home back."

That's the response I expected. What I wasn't expecting was what he said next.

"There were some others, though... others whose homes we worked on who just seemed to have given up. One had recently lost a close friend. One had lost his business and his home in the storm. It didn't seem to matter to them that we were rebuilding their home at all. I think they'd given up hope that they'd actually be 'home' ever again."

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So it was for Israel. They still lived on the land... but it wasn't home anymore... and they'd lost the faith to picture the possibility that it might ever be home again.

So the prophet Joel got to work. He gathered all the people. And he told them upfront: "Yes... things have been hard. We've messed up and had messed up things happen to us. There's no doubt about it. But that doesn't mean God has abandoned us. Not at all."

And then, then Joel started prophesying:

Be glad O children of Zion and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten... You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.

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You've heard me quote Frederick Buechner before. He's a Presbyterian pastor, and a prophet in our own time. In many ways, he sums up the promise of Joel amid a quote we've included as the Prayerful Reflection on the cover of the morning bulletin. He writes:

The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.¹

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Now... I'm not sure, but I think this may just be *the* most important role of faith—the reminder to look for grace. The reminder that we *are* a people of grace. The reminder that fullness of life has never been up to us... but allowing the grace of God to work through us.

That's the point of Jesus' parable in Luke.

There, he points to a Pharisee who, by even Jesus' own account, had his act together. The Pharisee fasted twice a week; gave a tenth or a tithe of his income; and obeyed every religious law there was. So according to his faith, he had no need of grace.

¹ Frederick Buechner, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/19982.Frederick_Buechner

Jesus said the Pharisee was praying next to a tax collector—a guy who couldn't even pretend to have his act together. Heck, everybody in Jerusalem knew the tax collector was messed up, because his very vocation was considered sinful.

But as Jesus tells it, the tax collector had the one thing the Pharisee so desperately needed. An awareness of his need for God. An awareness of his dependence on God and the grace only God could provide. An awareness of his need for God to enter in and offer possibilities he could never create on his own—possibilities of forgiveness... possibilities of life made new.

Jesus makes clear it is precisely that awareness—the awareness of our need for God and the trust of God's presence with us—that can make all the difference.

For you don't look for God's grace if you don't think you need it.

Only those who know they need grace look for it.

Which means the ones who look for it are the ones who end up encountering realities the world never thought possible, like the last becoming first and the humble being exalted.

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You know, it's why I often think that a good name for Christians would be People of Possibility. It seems to me, if Christians are in the business of anything... we're in the possibility business, are we not?

We're in the business of seeing what is, while beholding what can still be.

We're in the business of looking for what new life God yearns to bring forth.

After all, we're Easter People, right? People of the Resurrection. People who believe the preposterous notion that death isn't the end. That God's intentions for us are always far, far greater than we can imagine for ourselves.

And yet, as Joel and Jesus so regularly encountered, our all-too-flawed tendency is to not look for the possibilities—only the problems. We're far, far more comfortable worrying about worst case scenarios rather than dreaming of what can be and then chasing after it.

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In all transparency, I think this is one of the major reasons so many churches are in decline right now across the continent.

Now, please don't misunderstand. I know it's hard to be the church in the 21st century amid such rapidly changing times and culture. I also know that each church has its unique story, with unique problems in a unique environment.

But it's also true that many churches share a common thread to their struggles that goes something like this.

Culture changes... the environment around and within a once vibrant church shifts... and the church is slow to adapt.

As a result, membership declines.

As membership declines, so does revenue.

So with revenue and membership decline, the church is eventually pitted with a tipping point decision: invest in the future—vision what can be and take the risks to reach for it—OR simply hunker down amid the status quo and try to survive.

The church can spend what resources and energy it has on something bold and new and life-giving, or it try can try as hard as it can to once was and hope the trend just reverses itself.

Frankly... it's a choice between looking for possibilities or only seeing problems.
It's a choice between seeking to thrive or seeking to merely survive.

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Friends, the witness of Scripture is unequivocal in its call for us not to merely survive, but to thrive. It's what the grace of God is all about.

It's why Israel was called to be a light to the nations. Blessed to be a blessing.

And it's why you and I are called to be Easter People. People of Possibility. People who know the grace of God.... who know that God is still at work redeeming this world... who know we've been called to go and spread love and grace so that others can see the possibilities God intends for this world.

Possibilities that Brian McLaren points to throughout the first seven chapters of We Make the Road By Walking, the book we're studying together. In fact, in chapter six Brian offers a beautiful description on what he thinks the primary point of faith really is. He says, "True faith... (true faith is so much more than simply) being religious: (it's) a way of being alive." It's "stepping off the map of what's known and making a new road by walking into the unknown. It's responding to God's call to adventure, stepping out on a quest for goodness, trusting that the status quo isn't as good as it gets, believing a promise that a better life *is* possible..." for you, for me, and make no mistake... a better life for all.

It means, friends, that if the church is in the business of anything, we're in the possibility business. The business of looking for grace. The business of looking for what God is up to in our midst. The business of knowing we're called to do so much more than merely survive. Our call... even if it costs us our life... is to thrive. Amen.