

Victoria Ave/Emmanuel Baptist

Sunday, July 12, 2020

JOEL 2:1-11: GOD IN THE DARKNESS

I lived for many years in Manitoba. I always considered myself an ocean/mountain person and living on the prairies was not a particularly huge thrill. I am not saying that it didn't have its beauty...it absolutely did! I got tired of flat! I we use to joke about that fact that it was okay if your dog ran away, because you could watch your pet for a couple days.

One of the great beauties of the Prairies is found in the nickname, "Big Sky Country." The sky was amazing. The sunrises and sunsets. Looking up on a clear night and seeing the seemingly never ending display of stars...so clear. There were times when the northern lights would be out in force and I would stop my car on the side of the road and lie on the hood and look up at them. It was also spectacular in 1997 when the Hale-Bopp comet was visible to the naked eye and you could go outside and see this incredible display of creation hanging in the sky.

One of the great things about being in Big Sky Country were the storms! I love a good thunder and lightning storm. In Manitoba, because of the prairies, you could see a storm coming from miles away. To sit and watch a wall of clouds move towards you until it was overhead. The darkness slowly descended upon you in all its power.

Darkness...our society has this love/hate relationship with it. In film, a car breaks down, it is pitch black, the rain is falling...no help seems to be found when suddenly there is a flash of lightning and the outline of a run-down, abandoned looking mansion appears. Have you ever wondered why anyone would go to that door, let alone enter it never to be heard from again?

We have been conditioned to think of darkness as the home of evil. The hero heads towards the dark to rescue and vindicate. The darkness is depression, it is a place of lost souls, it is a mystery.

Often in modern religion and Christianity, we have been conditioned to think of God as light, as dwelling in splendorous settings, streets of gold, fluffy clouds, peace, calm, safety. But have we made our God too safe? Have we fundamentally misunderstood an characteristic of God that can be found in the

darkness? Feel good religion has made many deny that dark times exist. Feel good, shallow religion teaches of a God that wants you to have everything that you want...any and all material possessions are yours for the taking. If you experience sickness, depression, doubt, fear... you are somehow not a good enough Christian. Even more damaging has been the false idea that all you have to do is pray it away. "Grey skies are going to clear up...put on a happy face!"

Today in Joel we are going to see that darkness has its place in our lives and that even in the midst of darkness...God is there. Perhaps God is bringing darkness to get our attention!

Let's read Joel 2:1-11:

**2 Sound the trumpet in Jerusalem!
Raise the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let everyone tremble in fear
because the day of the LORD is upon us.
² It is a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of thick clouds and deep blackness.
Suddenly, like dawn spreading across the mountains,
a great and mighty army appears.
Nothing like it has been seen before
or will ever be seen again.
³ Fire burns in front of them,
and flames follow after them.
Ahead of them the land lies
as beautiful as the Garden of Eden.
Behind them is nothing but desolation;
not one thing escapes.
⁴ They look like horses;
they charge forward like warhorses.
⁵ Look at them as they leap along the mountaintops.
Listen to the noise they make—like the rumbling of chariots,
like the roar of fire sweeping across a field of stubble,
or like a mighty army moving into battle.**

**⁶ Fear grips all the people;
every face grows pale with terror.**

**⁷ The attackers march like warriors
and scale city walls like soldiers.
Straight forward they march,
never breaking rank.**

**⁸ They never jostle each other;
each moves in exactly the right position.
They break through defenses
without missing a step.**

**⁹ They swarm over the city
and run along its walls.
They enter all the houses,
climbing like thieves through the windows.**

**¹⁰ The earth quakes as they advance,
and the heavens tremble.
The sun and moon grow dark,
and the stars no longer shine.**

**¹¹ The LORD is at the head of the column.
He leads them with a shout.
This is his mighty army,
and they follow his orders.**

**The day of the LORD is an awesome, terrible thing.
Who can possibly survive?**

Things are not looking good for Judah. Israel has already been taken over and Judah's time is coming. The prophet Joel steps forward and gives a message from God, Yahweh, the Covenant God...and it isn't favorable.

Locust are coming. A plague, the likes that have never been seen before. Wait...there is more! Not only is there a horde of insects that will destroy everything in its path, but the darkness is coming. Gloom, clouds, blackness, that will be like the morning sun spreading out at dawn...except darkness instead of light.

What more could happen? You asked! Fire and flames accompany the darkness. Lush garden settings will become deserts. The noise they will make will be like the approach of horses and chariots racing to battle.

More...earthquakes that will shake the foundations. You will try to protect yourself, but it will be no use. All light, sun, moon, stars, will be snuffed out.

Perhaps the people cried out to the prophet and the priests..." Where is God?" "Why would God allow this!" "Surely God will protect!" And Joel's answer shocks them to the core.

"Where is God you ask? He is the one who is leading this army of devastation!" God is not just on His way...He is here already. This is the Day of the Lord!

SILENCE.....

The God of the Old Testament was not a deity that created the universe and then ignored it. God is a hands-on God and throughout scripture, from time to time, He shows up.

When God shows up, technically called a *theophany*, it often is accompanied by some type of physical manifestation that we see in Joel. One of the most important theophanies was God appearing on Mount Sinai to give His people the covenant through Moses. There was a trumpet blast, clouds, fire, thunder and lightning. God was getting the attention of his disobedient children and after years of warnings, He got their attention!

TODAY

Sometimes I wonder if we will ever learn from our history. We so often take God and put him in a box. Our society is so desperate to create a God in their own image to justify their bad behaviour...not much has changed. The Old Testament records how God's people went through a toxic cycle of disobedience. One of the most blatant records of this is found in the Book of Judges. Have you noticed the reoccurring lessons being taught. The people live pretty prosperously and begin disobeying God. God punishes the people by sending one of their enemies to invade and dominate them. The people turn back to God and cry out to him. God raises up a judge to free then lead His children. Life goes back to normal and each of them "does what is right in their own eyes..." And the cycle begins again.

Sadly, each time the cycle repeats, the people find even more sinful ways to disobey God.

GOD GETTING OUR ATTENTION

In Joel's day, the people needed to stop what they were doing, look at the darkness and truly find God. It was the only way the nation was going to be saved. God was trying to get their control.

I am going to suggest that in our world today, we face the same temptations and habits. Society so badly wants to justify their bad behaviour, that we convince ourselves that God loves us so much – regardless of our actions – that he would never discipline us. This has made us look at the darkness of our lives and complain about God abandoning us. We so quickly turn on God and blame him when our lives go off the road that we have decided to go down. We lose a job, we get sick, a loved one dies....on and on...and our reaction can quickly become "Why did God do this to me?" "Why did God allow this to happen?" "Where is God." In the extreme cases we hear, "A loving God wouldn't allow this to happen...so I won't believe in Him!"

We need to rediscover the God of the darkness, and yes, the God who uses darkness to get our attention and teach us.

The message to those of Joel's day, and to ours, is not a claim that the darkness does not exist—that is, that we should deny that any pain or anguish exists. Rather, the message is that, though the darkness is rising, it will be overcome by the light that Jesus brings and we need to remember the reality that we are not waiting on Jesus to show up...he is already here! Remember Psalm 139? David realized that there was no place he could go to escape God. Heights, depths, light, dark, David acknowledged that God was always there...and God is in the darkness.

Part of our maturing process spiritually is to understand that God is present and at work in the darkness even when we think He has abandoned us. Many understand this by using the phrase coined in a poem by 16th century Spanish monk, St. John of the Cross... "Dark Night of the Soul."

“Dark Night of the Soul” is that experience of feeling abandoned but God uses our circumstances to draw us nearer to Him. It is our own Job experience where we realize that God is enough and that Jesus and the Gospel message is beautiful even in the midst of suffering.

God absolutely can be found in those times where we feel and experience blessings, but we have a bad habit of focusing on the blessing rather than the presence of God. We even go so far as to deceive ourselves into thinking that we DESERVE the blessing. When we encounter God in darkness and in pain, the distractions are stripped away and we are forced to focus on God, himself, to help us through the darkness.

CONCLUSION

The Bible is clear! God loves you. He wants to know and be known by you. He has and will go to incredible lengths to get your attention. God has used fire, thunder, darkness, and earthquakes to get our attention as well as still quiet moments and a newborn baby.

May we learn from our own histories and respond to the God who wants to be active in our lives. May we approach Him with joy rather than force him to get our attention!

Let's pray...

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