

Showing Us the Way
A Sermon on Joel 2:23-32 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ October 23, 2022

This passage from the prophet Joel is one of my favorites. Hear just a few verses again, *You shall know that I am dwelling in the midst of you, wherever you live, and that I am the Lord of love, that I am your God, and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame. Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on every kind of people, rich and poor, slaves and free. And your sons and your daughters shall lead with vision and purpose, your old women shall share their wisdom, and your old men shall dream dreams.*

Joel's message is a message of hope for people who have experienced tragedy or deprivation. It was first delivered to the exiles after they returned from captivity in Babylon. It was a message of hope for them as they rebuilt the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.

I love the message, but I confess there are some days when I do not feel surrounded by God's spirit. There have been times when I felt like the well of God's goodness and strength was almost empty. There have been times when I felt overwhelmed by the challenges set before me.

In July of 2009, I was working as a chaplain at a hospital. On this particular day, I was visiting patients in the Gastro-intestinal unit, which was where I spent most of my time. I happened to be on call that day and my pager went off. So I called the chaplaincy office.

The chaplaincy office had received a request for a chaplain to come to the neo-natal Intensive Care Unit. A few days before, a young woman and her twins, infant children, had been in an automobile accident. One of the twins had died in the accident. The woman and the second child had been flown by helicopter to our hospital, which was the only Level 1 Trauma Care facility in northern New England. The young woman was not seriously injured, but her baby's injuries were life-threatening. Two days after they were brought to the hospital the second child died.

I checked in at the nurse's station in the neo-natal ICU. They thanked me for coming and told me it would be about 15 minutes before I could visit with the mother of the child. So I walked out to a bench in the central courtyard and sat down. I spent a minute or two, praying for strength and wisdom to support the mother in her grief.

I felt overwhelmed. I looked at my watch. It would be at least ten minutes before I could talk with the patient. So I took out my phone and I called Gordon. Gordon would know what to say at a time like this. I told Gordon my situation. Gordon responded with just one or two sentences. He said, "You have everything you need."

A few minutes later I was in the room, sitting with the young woman, doing the work of a chaplain. The work of a chaplain is to help the person sit with and accept and reflect on the broken pieces, the new reality of their life. The work of a chaplain is to help the person begin to come to terms with the brokenness, and to begin to see that the pieces might be put back together coherently.

The main reason I am standing in front of you, delivering this sermon, is that I have had the privilege of spending most of my life surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses to the love and grace of God. That privilege continues to this day. Of all of the witnesses to God's love, Gordon was the one who had the greatest impact on me.

For me, Gordon was one of the saints of God. His life wasn't perfect by any means. As with all of the saints, he struggled many times. He faced great challenges. Yet he was a witness to the power of God's love and grace in our lives.

Gordon grew up during the depression. His father had been laid off from his regular job as an architect. His mother was a public school teacher. Church was always important for Gordon and his family. Gordon looked up to the head pastor of the congregation. Then the pastor broke the trust of their relationship and abused him sexually when he was fifteen or sixteen years old.

Gordon worked all through his teenage years. He did the early morning run, before high school, delivering eggs and dairy products to bakeries. He was hired to deliver flowers to the hospital in the afternoons, after school. Gordon probably wasn't the best delivery boy. Gordon wasn't the most efficient because he always talked with the patients in the hospital. This was the part he liked best, talking with the patients in the hospital. Someone suggested that perhaps he should do something different from being a delivery boy. He should go to school to become a pastor.

While he was attending the University of Dubuque, in Iowa, the Methodist conference asked him to lead services at a little country church. By the time Gordon graduated, at the age of 20, he had led more than one hundred worship services.

Gordon married my mother, Flora, in 1955. They moved to New Jersey, where she taught elementary school. Gordon studied and worked as a seminarian and received his Master of Divinity degree from Drew Seminary.

In 1962 Gordon was in his third or fourth year as the pastor of a medium-sized Methodist Church in Bayonne, NJ, right across the river from Manhattan. The church was thriving and growing. Leaders of local businesses were members of the church council.

But Gordon was looking for something different, for something more. Gordon's search for a new ministry had something to do with St. Paul's vision of the church. In one of his earliest letters, Paul appealed to the churches in Galatia to put aside their divisions. Paul said, For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Gordon's vision was for the church of Christ Jesus to witness to the love that has the capacity to heal the divisions of America. For Gordon, the church was to be the place where God's spirit would be manifest in the diversity of the church community, rich and poor, black and white, highly educated and poorly educated.

In February of 1963, Gordon and Flora moved to Cleveland, Ohio. Gordon began leading a smaller, poorer congregation, the Church of St. Philip's, the Evangelist. Gordon took a photo of the front of the church, which you can find on p. 10 of your leaflet. St. Philip's met in a building that had been a tavern, prior to the founding of the congregation in the mid-50s. On Gordon's first Sunday a dozen people came for worship. The congregation was much like the neighborhood, lower and middle-income families. All of them, except for my family, were black.

Gordon loved the people, and they loved him just as much. The congregation grew steadily. At first the new members were people of the near east side, which was the very poorest neighborhood of the city. The church began new mission projects, including a thrift shop, summer programs for kids, and literacy classes for adults. News of the work of the church began to spread among the churches and people of the city. Eventually a larger, diverse group of people came to see the vision of St. Paul coming to life at St. Philip's Church: women and men, black and white, poor and rich, highly educated and illiterate. There were many other chapters of Gordon's life. Many of them were not nearly so beautiful or positive as the one I told you. But on the whole, Gordon was a steady witness to the power of God's love in our lives. So, for me, he was a kind of saint.

Sometimes when I read the words of Joel, I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people, I am wondering when and how this will happen. At those times when I feel discouraged, I remember Gordon. I remember his love for God. I remember his love for God's people.

You have a similar story to tell. You have someone in your life who has been a witness to the power of God's love, to the power of God's creativity, someone who has been a witness to God's desire for the truth.

We are fourteen days away from our celebration of the saints in our lives, All Saints Day. So I encourage you to take some time in the next fourteen days to reflect on the life of someone who brings courage, and wisdom, and strength to your life. This might be someone you know personally, like a friend or family member, or they might be someone you don't know personally, like Eleanor Roosevelt or Greta Thunberg. The person who functions as a saint in your life might be someone who is younger than you or someone who died many years ago.

I encourage you to spend some time reflecting and considering some of the people who serve as saints for you. Consider if there is a photograph, or object, or a poem, or other words that point toward the way they bring more love and goodness to the world. I encourage you to remember them more deeply. Write some of their story, or some words about them, or just spend some time remembering them. God has given us the gift of memory. As you spend more time reflecting on the person who is a saint for you, you will find you are remembering more and more of what was most important about them. Then, on November 6th, I encourage you to bring in a photo or some other object that points toward the love, wisdom, and grace this person has brought and continues to bring to your life.

The important thing is that we are not on this journey alone. We are journeying with God, but God moves in a mysterious way. God's ways are not our ways. We do not fully understand the way God is working. So we turn to others who are on the journey with us, or who have made the journey before us. They are witnesses to the power of God's love, creativity, and truth in our lives. They are showing us the way forward.