

Date: November 19, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 33 (Thanksgiving)

SERMON: Earth Without Fear

Text(s): Joel 2:21-27; Matthew 6:24-33

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One of our members, who shall be nameless, recently sent me an email with the following touching Thanksgiving story they got off the Internet.

A retired man and his wife were living in Phoenix. Two days before Thanksgiving, the husband called his son in New York and said, "I don't want to spoil your holiday, but I thought I should tell you, your mother and I are getting a divorce. Frankly, we can't stand the sight of each other any more; forty-five years of misery is enough."

"What!" his son screamed into the phone. "You can't do that. What do you mean you're getting divorced!"

His dad replied, "I don't want to talk about it any more. Call your sister in Chicago and let her know." Then he hung up.

The son immediately phoned his sister, who had the same reaction. Outraged and horrified, she said, "Oh no, they're not. I'll take care of this. You get on a plane and meet me there." Then she called her parents and started yelling at her father on the phone, "Don't you dare do this! There is no way this is going to happen! I'll be there tomorrow and we'll get this straightened out. Don't you dare do anything till I get there." And with that she hung up.

Her father also hung up the phone, turned to his wife and said, "Well, they're both coming for Thanksgiving and paying their own way."

This Thanksgiving, perhaps it would be good to keep in mind the profound wisdom of that great American philosopher Dave Barry, who wrote in his column in November 1995, "We are approaching the Thanksgiving holiday, when we pause to reflect on our blessings by eating pretty much non-stop for an entire day, then staggering off to bed, still chewing, with wads of stuffing

clinging to our hair."

Actually, Dave Barry's description of Thanksgiving is pretty biblical. In the book of Deuteronomy, instructions are given to the people for celebrating the annual harvest, and basically, the instructions go something like this.

Bring a tithe (one-tenth) of your harvest into the sanctuary and in the presence of the priest, dedicate it to God. Then take it and buy as much rich food and strong liquor as you can and throw a big feast and invite all your friends and neighbors and any widows or resident aliens and give thanks to God for your blessings by eating and drinking and partying till you drop. (It's in Deuteronomy 14 if you want to check it out.)

Now that's not exactly what we do with the money we put in the offering basket each Sunday, but it would be a lot of fun if we did, wouldn't it?

The point of that, is similar to the point made in both of our scripture lessons which are the Thanksgiving texts for this year. In both of them, thankful and joyous celebration of God's provision for our lives is at the heart, though in both, there is an acknowledgment that God's providential blessings are not always immediately obvious.

In the prophecy of Joel, who lived and worked roughly 400 years before the time of Jesus, there had apparently been a devastating plague of locusts that had devoured all the crops and created a ruinous famine. In good prophetic fashion, the prophet Joel saw this plague of locusts as a sign of the approach of what he and many other prophets referred to as "the Day of the Lord." This "Day" was not a date on the calendar, but rather a discerning of God's presence and activity within human events, activity experienced as both judgment and salvation.

As some of us discussed in our Wednesday morning Bible study this past week, the biblical notion of judgment doesn't have to do so much with punishment as with revelation or clarification. When bad things happen, it's not

that God is punishing us, but that we are jolted out of our complacency, out of our comfortable illusions, out of our careless ways of living and forced to see our own situation more clearly for what it really is. Judgment clarifies things. Judgment is brush-clearing so that the flowers of peace and fruits of justice may grow.

In our own day we have no shortage of self-styled prophets for whom judgment seems to be the final word. They interpret every disaster as a punishment from God for the mess we've made of things. Just look at some of the ridiculous statements made by some of these would-be prophets in the wake of the tsunami a few years ago or in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

But there is a big difference between our modern-day prophets of doom and the biblical prophets. The Pat Robertsons and James Dobsons of our day always seem to be secretly delighted that disaster has struck. It's almost as though they see it as personal vindication of their own point of view. There's little compassion and a lot of arrogance and self-righteousness in their pronouncements.

But not so with the biblical prophets. Stern as their warnings were sometimes, we never get the sense that their own egos are invested. Rather, their concern is always to move as quickly as possible from the clarification of judgment to the promise that always accompanies it. Their message is not "See what happens when you forget God? It serves you right." Rather, it is, "Granted that things are bad and may get worse, but let's get ready for the new thing that God is about to do with us and for us. God is going to give us a fresh start. God is going to build up what has been torn down. That's a very different kind of message, isn't it. That's a message of grace, of salvation, of hope.

And that's the sort of message we hear, both from the ancient prophet Joel and from Jesus in our Gospel lesson.

After delivering the bad news that the people should take the plague of locusts as a sign that they need to get ready for God's saving act, Joel move quickly on to the promise. He says, *Fear not, O soil, be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things! Fear not, you animals of the field, for the pastures are green again and the trees and vines produce their full yield. O you children of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given the early rain for your deliverance. The threshing floors will be full of grain and the vats shall overflow with olive oil. I will repay you for the years 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.*

I love that message. Fear not, O soil. Fear not, O animals. Rejoice O people!

We don't seem to have gotten to that point yet, have we? We're still trying to absorb the bad news of the judgment. We're still struggling with the growing body of scientific evidence that tells us that the soil and the animals and the people have good reason to be afraid in the face of what appears to be the runaway pace of global warming. The polar ice caps are melting, climate is changing, and we don't know where it's all going except that we're beginning to understand that to a lesser or greater extent, we're responsible for it, and we don't seem to really have either the knowledge, the skill, or more importantly perhaps, the moral resolve and political will to do much about it. Detroit is still building big gas-guzzlers and we're still buying them.

Many of us saw the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, either when it was here at the Eveningstar last summer or when our Earth Care team sponsored a showing a few weeks ago. One of the things I appreciated about that movie, was that despite the rather grim statistics about the sharp rise of rise in greenhouse gases and the scary implications, the film held out to us a

message, not of ultimate disaster, but of hope, if we have both clarity of vision and the moral will and courage to act. To that extent, it's message was in the mode of the biblical prophets: ultimately the message is not, "Woe to you for polluting the earth," but "Look what opportunities still remain for us to work together to reverse the damage we've caused." Fear not, O soil. Fear not you animals of the field. Rejoice you people. God has not forsaken you or rejected you; a new day is about to dawn.

That message of hope is not just cheap optimism; it is the product of faith. Not faith as blind wishful thinking, but faith as ultimate trust of our lives to the Ultimate Reality, whom we believe has been revealed as life-giving rather than life-destroying.

Such faith is what Jesus speaks of in our Gospel lesson: *Why are you so concerned about all the necessities of life?* he asks. *Why do you fuss and fret and spend your time and energy in an obsessive quest for security? Don't you know that God already knows and has provided for these things? Don't you know that if God has provided so wondrously for the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, God has also provided even more abundantly for you? So stop being so consumed with anxiety. Seek first God's reign in your lives and God's justice and then all of these necessities of life will take care of themselves.*

There's something that is at once, very appealing and very frightening about that, isn't there? Appealing because we'd all love to be that free of anxiety, wouldn't we? And frightening, because the thought of letting go of that anxiety and of acting with such freedom scares us silly. It seems so. . . well, irresponsible. And we are nothing if not responsible people.

Could it be that we find that statement scary just because we have all along been trying to do what Jesus says is impossible— to serve two masters? And now we find ourselves so encumbered by the one master— money, and all

that it symbolizes in our lives— house payments, grocery bills, clothing, taxes, college tuition, car payments, boat payments, retirement savings, health insurance, home entertainment systems, not to mention the Christmas gift orgy that's fast approaching, that we find the call to freedom by the other master frightening? It's all very well for Jesus, an itinerant teacher and healer with seemingly few responsibilities to talk about trusting God for our ultimate security, but Jesus didn't have to worry about paying for health care in his old age. We do.

I think we miss the point if we think Jesus wasn't aware of the importance of paying our bills and meeting our obligations. I think he's talking about how we order our priorities. How we decide about what's most important and what's least important, and then try as best we can to live by those priorities.

I come back to that ancient description of the ceremony of thanksgiving for the harvest described in the book of Deuteronomy and to the joyous proclamation to the earth and the animals and to the people from the prophecy of Joel. In neither is there any suggestion that the crops grew themselves or harvested themselves. There was a heck of a lot of hard work and responsibility involved. God's provision was in the richness of the soil, the warmth of the sun, the early and later rains. But the rest was up to the farmer. The soil was tilled by back-breaking labor, the seeds were sown with vigilance to make sure the birds didn't eat them all, and the crops were harvested with plenty of sweat.

But the command to set aside the tithe and then to bring it to the sanctuary as an offering of thanksgiving and then to spend it in throwing a big party was a command designed to remind people about what was really important in life. It was a memory aid, if you will. It helped the farmer remember that the very ground on which all his own hard work, all his own care, all his own investment rested, was the provision of a God whose gift of the soil and sun and rain had

made it all possible. It was a reminder that the earth has been given into our care for our benefit— we are both stewards of creation and the recipients of that stewardship. Or as Ghandi reminded us so poignantly, “The earth has enough for every person’s need, but not for every person’s greed.” Ritually giving thanks for the harvest each year, for the earth itself, an earth without fear, an earth capable of producing abundantly for all human needs, is really an act of faith, and ultimately an commitment to just relationships. Which is why the celebration took the form of a great feast to which everyone in the neighborhood, including the poor and the marginalized, was invited. Living in an attitude of thanksgiving for God’s bounty creates and sustains a just community.

So as we eat our way through the day on Thursday, and as we stumble off to bed with crumbs of stuffing in our hair, let’s also use it as an occasion for taking another look at our priorities and where it is we are placing our ultimate trust for our lives, and whether or not we are truly seeking first God’s kingdom of justice. If we do that, then somewhere in among the cranberries and the drumsticks and the sweet potatoes, and the football games, we may discover springing up within us a well of thanksgiving that has the power to fill us with joy and hope.