

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Bill Skubi Preaching on Joel 2:23-32, Luke 18:9-14

**Things hoped for and not seen –**

Customary as it is to preach from the Gospel passage, I don't see how I can take Jesus' words slighting the Pharisee who boasts of following rules and giving 10% tithe to the church each year in favor of the penitent tax collector and deliver an effective stewardship sermon, "Thank you Jesus!"

Instead, I will preach from the Prophet Joel. Not much is known about this prophet and scholars are unsure who he was and when he lived. Because the entire prophecy is a just two leaves of my 1500 page New English Study Bible it is almost impossible to find without a bookmark.

Such commentaries as there are on Joel usually emphasize the strength of the Hebrew poetry. Heather Strong Moore says the poetry feels like a good horror story and notes that Joel uses the phrase Day of the Lord 5 times referring to the events when God's presence is made known, both in Judgement and Deliverance. In graphic detail Joel describes wave after wave of devouring insects that strip the land clean of all vegetation.

Joel poses a central question to the faithful "Do we believe God's presence in judgement is preferable to God's absence in comfort and complacency?" Let me repeat that thought this way, "For the faithful God's presence in judgement is greater than the absence of God in comfort." And why is this?

I will return to my trusty old study bible, forty years ago while attending another church I would sometimes take the front page of our Sunday bulletin preprinted with a picture and bible verse and paste it in my bible to recall a particular verse. And so, my bible is salted through with various verses. Inside the front cover the first of these reads: "For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth." Prov. 3:12

Joel instructs us that the terrible days of the Lord's judgement come first, "And thereafter" God pours out the Holy Spirit in free grace restitution on us all.

How will we know the Holy Spirit of God has filled us?

Joel tells us the old ones will dream dreams and your young ones see visions.

Here we are getting very close to comprehending the mystery of Faith itself! Have you ever searched a deep question of philosophy or contemplated a hidden mystery whose truth can only be revealed by embracing paradox, apparent opposites that coexist like grumpy old married couples?

"Now Faith," we read, and where do we read it but on the second page of my study bible where I have pasted, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1

Now, let's take these in reverse order starting with Joel's young ones seeing visions because this outpouring of spirit is, in a way, self-fulfilling and self-evident, in the younger people who are popping up in our congregation like mushrooms after an autumn rain. Young people were a thing not seen in our parish for years, (remember Faith Is the evidence of things not seen) and now there is evidence of their precious presence -- so near at hand -- These younger people through faith are becoming the evidence of their own Visions. Alleluia, praise God who is here present and pours out the spirit of Faith on us!

Now, how about the first part of the Joel/Faith equation; the old people dreaming dreams/ the substance of things hoped for? This is a lot harder nut to pry apart, as are most things concerning we older folk. This will take a deep dive into the recent history of our parish.

Not so many months ago your vestry was invited to a 4-hour Saturday Zoom meeting for every vestry in the Diocese of Olympia. In this meeting 150 gray-haired, muted heads were sternly warned to shun “faith-based” church budgets. By this was meant budgets for staff, programs, and operating expenses where the money to pay for it all fell squarely in the “things hoped for” part of faith without the do-re-mi to cover actual costs. Since St. Augustine’s has been running a budget deficit for the last seven years, we left this meeting with our hopes for a full-time rector in tatters. Over the next week we were sure that calling a part-time Rector was the only responsible course of action. Then in one of those strange paradoxes that always seem to underlie all of Life’s really big decisions the same Bishop Rickel, who had presided over the meeting that convinced us that a part time rector was the only way forward, caught wind of our plight and asked to speak with us.

So, in another Zoom meeting, this time not with dozens of vestries, but just our own, our Bishop encouraged us to reconsider, telling us that in his experience no parish that fell from a full-time rector to part-time had ever regained a full-time rector in subsequent years.

And so, this mystery of faith, of things hoped for was straddling a paradox. In this high stakes game of parish poker the Bishop played his final card. “I have always considered parish endowments a kind of rainy-day fund. My question to you,” he asked us with eyes drilling us through the Zoom, “Is just how hard does it have to rain?”

Now, for as long as anyone can remember St. Augustine’s endowment has had one ironclad rule. The endowment could be used for brand new programs, for major maintenance and construction, but under no circumstances should the endowment ever be used for operating expenses, chief among these being Rector’s salary or any staff salary for that matter.

To use any part of the endowment in this way, would require the vestry to vote twice with a two thirds majority at two subsequent monthly vestry meetings to change the one rule that had kept our endowment intact and growing all these years.

And this is exactly what the vestry did. “How hard does it have to rain?”

This Act of Faith had to be taken before the Vestry could decide to call a full-time rector. This act of Faith had to be made before any candidates could be presented to our Search Committee to consider. This commitment to a thing hoped for had to be sealed by the vestry before we knew that our first choice for rector would even accept our call.

So, what is this Faith that we acted upon? What was the substance of this thing so dearly hoped for by the Bishop, the vestry and so many of you? Our Faith, the substance of this thing collectively hoped for was not the Bishop’s blessing, or the Vestry’s resolve, the substance of things hoped for, in this instance, were material gifts, given in faith by faithful parishioners no longer with us. Without this very special provision everyone of us here today would be facing a very different future together.

Now, wherever that future leads us I hope everyone here remembers that when the Parish of St. Augustine's in the woods stood at this important crossroads, we chose our path, not with a LEAP of faith, but carried over Jordan on the shoulders of those who gave of their substance to give life to our faith, to be the very substance of things hoped for.

Now, as the creator of all things pours out the holy spirit on us all, we old ones will dream dreams and the young ones will see visions, so let us all give of what is given to us that our dreams will have substance and our visions not be without the vivid evidence of faith.

By the name of Jesus we pray, Amen