

What Do You Do When the Well Runs Dry?

Joel 1-2

October 25, 1998

We have been given the task and the privilege of tending God's garden. Where is God's garden? Look around you -- look at the people sitting behind you and around you, look out at the world beyond these walls. There it is! There is God's garden!

We have been given the task of using our resources and skills to nurture beauty and goodness in the land. We have been given the task of using our resources and skills to nurture beauty and goodness in the people about us. We nurture beauty by expressing love ... love for the earth and love for people. We love the earth by treating it as an end in itself, not just a resource at our disposal to use and use up for our own benefit. We love people by treating them as ends in themselves -- to be valued and cared for -- not as competitors to be bettered, rivals to be overpowered, threats to be vanquished. We nurture goodness by doing acts of righteousness and justice and peace.

This is our task ... but sometimes we fail. Sometimes because of us and sometimes in spite of us the bottom drops out, the well runs dry, the garden plants wither and die. Sometimes disaster happens to us or around us, deserved or undeserved -- disaster that gnaws at our sense of dignity and purpose; disaster that sows the seeds of doubt and despair in us; disaster that makes us wonder if our garden can ever produce anything but weeds or rotted fruit.

What do you do when disaster happens? What do you do when the well runs dry? The book of Joel offers us a case in point. Joel addresses people who have experienced an enormous agricultural disaster. A prolonged drought and repeated infestations of locusts have ravaged their crops and left them with little to use to survive. In response to this disaster, Joel calls the people to repent and to expect. He calls them to repentance and expectation.

He calls them first to repentance ...

*Repent sincerely and return to me with fasting and weeping and mourning ...
let your broken heart show your sorrow.*

Now wait a minute ... just hold on. I have just had total disaster visited on me and my household and now on top of everything else you want me to feel guilty too? I'm supposed to blame myself for everything that goes wrong in my life? Well, thanks for the help ...

It is true that the Old Testament makes a strong connection between faithfulness and fortune, between obedience and God's blessing, disobedience and disaster. But even the Old Testament does not look at this issue in a one-sided or simplistic way ... just read the book of Job!

Even in Joel, something different seems to be going on. Unlike other of the prophetic writings in the Old Testament, Joel does not address specific sins of the people -- failures of faith or compassion or justice. Joel seems instead to want to speak to the reality of the disaster already experienced, to use the experience of disaster as an object lesson, to provoke clear thinking and renewed faith. He sees disaster as providing an opportunity to reflect, to reassess, to refocus, to regroup.

Isn't this true to our own experience? Sometimes when everything is going smoothly, we can forget the things that matter most. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we have made it happen, that we are in complete control, that we are masters of our own fate.

Bad times -- deserved or undeserved -- may wake us up, make us face things with honesty and humility. Bad times may allow us to see things as they really are and lead us to reestablish our connection to God, acknowledging again our utter dependence on God. This recognition of utter dependence on God is at the root of all genuine faith, of all genuine stewardship, of all genuine mission.

And this proper sense of dependence leads in turn to a renewed sense of expectation. God will make things good and beautiful again. The garden after all is not ours, it is God's. It is God who makes things grow ... it is God who will make things grow again.

What do you do when the well runs dry? Do you throw your hoe in the trash and give up gardening? When disaster happens, do you pull back and put up the walls and live only to protect yourself from further injury?

Faith is the ability -- even in the middle of disaster -- to see things as they will be. It is not optimism, but the certainty that God will make God's garden good and beautiful once more. It is faith that allows you -- even when the well has run dry -- to continue to plant seeds and hoe weeds in expectation of the wonderful harvest that God will provide.