Joel 2:21–27

21 “Fear not, O land;
be glad and rejoice,
for [h]the Lord has done great things!
22 Fear not, [i]you beasts of the field,
for [j]the pastures of the wilderness are green;
[k]the tree bears its fruit;
the fig tree and [k]vine give their full yield.
23 [l]“Be glad, O children of Zion,
and [l]rejoice in the Lord your God,
for he has given [m]the early rain for your vindication;
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
[m]the early and [n]the latter rain, as before.
24 “The threshing floors shall be full of grain;
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
25 I will restore[1] to you the years
that [o]the swarming locust has eaten,
[o]the hopper, [o]the destroyer, and [o]the cutter,
[p]my great army, which I sent among you.
26 [q]“You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people [r]shall never again be put to shame.
27 [s]You shall know that I am [t]in the midst of Israel,
and that [u]I am the Lord your God [v]and there is none else.
And my people [r]shall never again be put to shame.

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanksgiving is a holiday of intentionality. We pause our normal daily rhythms to center specifically on gratitude. It’s a day when we count our blessings.

On this Thanksgiving Day we hear scriptural passages appointed for this holiday. The Old Testament reading is from the book of Joel. What prompted Joel to write his prophecy was a plague of locusts. A great army of locusts descended on Israel

and utterly consumed every plant. Even the bark of trees was stripped. The land was left devastated. It was a national disaster of catastrophic proportion.

It may seem absurd to select our Thanksgiving reading from a book describing such a sweeping destruction. Surely there would be another passage somewhere within the pages of this good, good book for an evening such as this, a passage not associated with devastation and ruin!

But maybe that’s the challenge for us. It’s easy to lift our hearts and voices in praise when life is good. We can be rejoicing when there are sheaves aplenty to be brought in. When we see the harvest of sown fields, fruits of the orchard, we readily offer our praise and thanksgiving. Thanksgiving comes easy in times of plenty. But where are our praises during seasons of want?

Maybe Joel is calling us to a harvest of thanksgiving even when there is no harvest to be had. How do we find gratitude and praise after the locusts have struck?

Every Thanksgiving we bring more than bounty to our tables. Yes, the table is laden with turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes and candied yams. But is there also room at the table for emotional dishes more of the variety present at a Seder meal? Can we bring the bitter herbs and the salt water of our tears? Is there a space for the apple charoset of our exhaustion, the unleavened bread of our unfulfilled yearnings?

Like the empty chair for Elijah, Joel calls us to make room for our sorrows at the Thanksgiving table. Comingled with our thanksgiving, we also acknowledge our fear, confusion, worry, and sorrow. Tragedy and suffering and want are present in every one of our lives.

Joel calls us to bring all of our complexities and the full range of our concerns to the Thanksgiving table. This holiday is intended to go deeper than just a thin veneer of artificial happiness and cheer. Whether we mark the day by ourselves or with a large gathering, all who come to the table of thanks come with their

own set of concerns and fears. Our intention to give thanks will be incomplete unless it also welcomes and embraces these burdens.

From the barrenness of their devastation, Joel calls Israel to hope. “Do not fear,” he says. “Do not fear, O soil, do not fear, you animals of the field!” Joel points them to the steadfast love of God who renews the face of the earth. “Your threshing floors shall be full of grain, your vats shall overflow with wine and oil.”

Jesus says the same thing in the Gospel of Matthew: do not fear. He asks, “Can worrying add a single hour to the span of your life?” Jesus calls us to trust in our God who provides for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. God will provide, even when the future seems uncertain. Even when evil looms large, God is faithful.

In her book The Hiding Place, Corrie ten Boom wrote of her experience in the death camp Ravensbruck during World War II. Corrie’s family in Holland had hid Jews from the Nazis. The day came when their actions were exposed. The ten Booms were arrested.

Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to Ravensbruck. They were able to secret in a Bible with them. That Bible uplifted their hearts and allowed them to inspire their fellow prisoners.

But their situation was dire. On top of the continual threat of punishment and the gnawing hunger, their barracks was filled with fleas. They drove Corrie batty. She complained to Betsie.

Betsie recalled their devotional reading that morning from First Thessalonians: give thanks in all circumstances.

Giving thanks in all circumstances wasn’t intended to sugar coat their suffering. It didn’t diminish the reality of their hardships. It was a command to hope. Betsy called on Corrie to give thanks.

Corrie wrote: “We can start right now to thank God for every single thing about this new barracks!’ I stared at her; then around me at the dark, foul-aired room.

“‘Such as?’ I said.

“‘Such as being assigned here together.’

“I bit my lip. ‘Oh yes, Lord Jesus!’

“‘Such as what you’re holding in your hands.’ I looked down at the Bible.

“‘Yes! Thank You, dear Lord, that there was no inspection when we entered here! Thank You for all these women, here in this room, who will meet You in these pages.’

“‘Yes,’ said Betsie, ‘Thank You for the very crowding here. Since we’re packed so close, that many more will hear!’

“She looked at me expectantly. ‘Corrie!’ she prodded.

“‘Oh, all right. Thank You for the jammed, crammed, stuffed, packed suffocating crowds.’

“‘Thank You,’ Betsie went on serenely, ‘for the fleas and for–’

“The fleas! This was too much. ‘Betsie, there’s no way even God can make me grateful for a flea.’

“‘Give thanks in all circumstances,’ she quoted. It doesn’t say, ‘in pleasant circumstances.’ Fleas are part of this place where God has put us.” Reluctantly, Corrie thanked God for the fleas.

Some time passed. Corrie and Betsie began to hold worship gatherings in their dormitory room. So many prisoners wanted to participate that they began

holding two services. They were able to do this because the guards never seemed to enter into their barracks.

As time went by, they found out why. It was the fleas. The guards didn’t want to enter the flea-infested dormitory. Corrie wrote: “My mind rushed back to our first hour in this place. I remembered Betsie’s bowed head, remembered her thanks to God for creatures I could see no use for.”

There is room at the thanksgiving table for all the facets of our complex lives. For fleas and locusts, for fears and longings, we bring the full complement of our worries and our joys and our tears. Thanksgiving is large enough for them all. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. Amen.