

“New Wine”
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Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church
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Scripture: Joel 2:28-29; Luke 5:30-39

I. Wouldn't it be great if...?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could live in a time when the prophet Joel's predictions, as heard in today's scripture, came true? Imagine experiencing the Holy Spirit pouring out Her wild creativity and love on all people, inspiring young and old alike to dream dreams and glimpse God's vision for us.

I can see our children, who are currently stressed about the future in a climate-changed, politically polarized, and economically challenged world, finding hope that their future need not follow the bleak course they expect. I envision our young adults moving into the world, empowered by God's vision, charting a new course—building more just, loving, and sustainable communities and social structures based on divine wisdom. And I can see our elders dreaming dreams they've never dared before, overjoyed to live in an era where Christ's prayer, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” is finally coming to fruition.

Who wouldn't want to live in such a time? Interestingly, this specific part of Joel's prophecy has been fulfilled—many times—throughout history. Yet, very few people find that these times produce the levels of joy they might reasonably expect.

Two examples come to mind: the century following Christ's ministry and the Renaissance in Europe during the 14th and 15th centuries. Both were times when the world experienced a cosmic download of the Holy Spirit. Masses of people caught a fresh vision of how life could be better for themselves and their communities, and they turned these visions into reality. While these times of “cosmic download” brought blessings and benefits that continue to impact our world to this day, those who lived through these periods experienced their share of terror and tumult as the old order—the one that had benefitted from the old ways of being—fought hard against the turning tide.

Take, for instance, the first-century Christians. They were ignited by Christ's resurrection and the Holy Spirit's fire at Pentecost. Yet, when they carried their joyous vision of spiritual and social transformation out into the world, what happened? Despite being Jews themselves, these first Christians encountered more resistance—and even persecution—than welcome among their Jewish peers. When they ventured beyond the confines of Judaism, they found the Roman government even less welcoming.

Over the next seven weeks, as we explore our “Seven Letters to Seven Churches” series, you'll have a front-row seat to witness the many struggles that early Christian communities faced when young and old dared to dream dreams and implemented God's vision for a new and better way of life. The old order, which controlled the purse strings, the sword, and public opinion, wasn't nearly as impressed with this new way of life as its adherents were. As a result, many early Christian saints experienced not only the flames of the Holy Spirit but also the

flames of Roman bonfires, as they were burned at the stake as heretics and enemies of the state.

Are you still sure you'd like to live in an era when Joel's prophecy is being fulfilled?

This instance is not an anomaly. Consider a more recent example of the Renaissance, just 500 years ago.

We tend to look back at the Renaissance with rose-colored glasses, assuming that people must have been overjoyed to be alive during a time when everything—from science to art, from economics to architecture, from philosophy to political science—experienced burst after burst of creativity and insight. Yet, as profound and long-lasting as these new insights and the blessings that accompanied them were, the average person was freaking out during the Renaissance. After all, everything they knew or believed to be true was shifting and falling apart!

When tectonic plates beneath the earth's crust shift, they produce earthquakes and erupting volcanoes. Similarly, tectonic shifts in human consciousness topple the tables on existing power structures and the institutions and beliefs that support them, resulting in great chaos and uncertainty.

Can you imagine waking up one day to realize that almost everything you ever thought to be true was wrong and that most everything that brought you comfort and security had vanished?

I suspect many of us are more familiar with this feeling than we'd like to admit! I'll get to that shortly. But for now, consider those poor souls living during the Renaissance. As everything they thought they knew and nearly every source of comfort and security they relied on crumbled around them, many turned to their faith as a refuge.

For a time, the Church seemed to be the last great bulwark against change. Yet, even the Church could not withstand the Holy Spirit's strong winds for long. The crisis grew so deep within the Catholic Church that it eventually split between two rival popes—one in Rome and the other in Avignon, France. In fact, for nearly 40 years, three popes claimed to be the only legitimate heir to St. Peter, each excommunicating the others! That's how deep the crisis was within the Church of the Renaissance.

Well, it's not as if Jesus didn't warn us that such things would happen when the Spirit starts stirring the pot. As we heard in our second scripture reading: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise, not only will one tear the new garment, but the piece from the new will not match the old garment. Similarly, no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins and will spill out, and the skins will be ruined." Then, acknowledging how hard it is even for the faithful to wrap their heads around new ideas and ways of being, Jesus adds, "And no one after drinking old wine desires the new wine but says, 'The old is good.'"

Before moving any further, I invite you to take a few moments to consider your feelings about our present era. Could it be that our current political, economic, and even spiritual tumult is not the result of so many bad things coming into our world that we're powerless to stop, but because so many good things have come into the world that even our most trusted and time-

honored institutions – including political parties and religious institutions – aren't sufficient to incorporate them all?

II. From Paper Clips to Cloning Sheep

Consider the following developments that took place over the last century:

- In 1900, the first patent on record in the New York City Patent Office was for a paper clip. By the year 2000, we were cloning sheep!
- In 1900, astronomers believed the Milky Way was the only galaxy in the universe. By 2000, we had launched a telescope into space and discovered at least 100 billion galaxies.
- In 1900, forced labor or legalized slavery was practiced in nearly 200 countries. By 2000, legalized slavery was virtually non-existent.
- In 1900, approximately four out of every ten children died before their fifth birthday. Now, that number is four in a hundred.
- In 1900, women had the right to vote in just one country. By 2000, nearly 200 countries recognize this right.
- In 1900, only two in ten adults (age 15+) had basic reading and writing skills. By 2000, more than 8 in ten could read.
- Good thing literacy is higher since, in 1900, fewer than 200 scholarly articles were published per year, but now the number is around 2.5 million.
- In 1900, nearly 80% of the world's population lived in extreme poverty. Now, it's about 9%.
- In just the last 60 years, malnourishment has dropped from 35% to less than 9%. This means nearly 2 billion more people are being fed!
- Along the way, we either eradicated or significantly reduced the impact of certain devastating diseases during the last century – diseases like smallpox, polio, malaria, measles, and tuberculosis.

Looking at these and other blessings, it's clear that during the last century or so, Joel's vision once again became reality. Our elders dared to dream dreams. Our children and youth saw visions. We acted on these dreams and visions, and so many blessings resulted that even the great Renaissance seems pretty minor by comparison.

Yet, the blessings that toppled the tables during the Renaissance were followed by massive violence and warfare as people whose old world had fallen apart struggled to find consensus on what the new world should look like. It's no accident that what followed the Great Renaissance was the Great Reformation! This is what happens when "new wine" bursts old "wineskins." You've got to build new skins to contain it.

Now, here's my point: If you're wondering why Republicans and Democrats can't seem to see eye to eye on anything these days, or why 26% of Americans – and 48% of American parents – say their stress is “completely overwhelming,” I hope you'll consider that, in the last century, so much “new wine” has been poured into our old “wineskins” that nearly every institution we know has burst its seams. Just as the Renaissance led to the Reformation, we are currently in a grand struggle to make sense of it all and create a new consensus about what kind of world is being birthed.

Here's my second point: As far as I know, every time human society has experienced Jesus-level change or Reformation-level change, it has always led to a period of intense violence. Yet, now that we've democratized the instruments of mass destruction, making it easier and easier to kill each other with every passing day, we can't afford to stay on this train. The bridge is out ahead! Somehow, we must do something that literally “history does not expect” of us. We've got to jump the track, or human civilization as we know it may literally be nuked back to the Stone Age.

Here's my final point: All this means that how you live your life right now, right here, *really matters*. It matters to you, to your loved ones, and to many generations to come.

Thankfully, it also matters to the Holy Spirit. And because it matters to the Holy Spirit, I do not believe that the Spirit is sitting back in heaven, waving down to us and saying, “Let me know how it all works out for you.” Those who are open to allowing the Holy Spirit to work in and through them have a powerful Helper.

Are you one of them?

I had a dream not long ago. I don't know if it was a prophet-Joel-level dream or not, but I find myself thinking about it more and more these days.

I dreamt that all of human civilization suddenly found itself in heaven, having just experienced the consequences of unleashing World War III. We all stood before the judgment seat of God, divided into two groups representing both sides of the conflict. Then we heard God ask, “Why did you not use all the tools I gave you for making peace? I gave you more than enough!”

Each side then considered the various peace-making tools they had at their disposal on earth and deliberated over their effectiveness. Finally, representatives from both opposing sides stepped forward. Each insisted that their side had not, in fact, been given all the tools necessary to create the kind of peace that could have saved the world. Each side had only half the necessary tools.

In response, we heard God's voice thunder: “Of course neither side had all the tools necessary for creating peace. What did you expect of someone like me? I gave the other half to *your enemies!*”

That's my dream. I'm sticking with it.