

## Telling a New Story

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“I will pour out my spirit on all flesh...” -Joel 2:28

A sermon by: Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

Preached: October 24, 2010 ~ Historical Sunday  
First Congregational Church (UCC) of Colorado Springs

### Joel 2:23-32

<sup>23</sup>O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. <sup>24</sup>The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. <sup>25</sup>I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. <sup>26</sup>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 shall never again be put to shame. <sup>27</sup>You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

<sup>28</sup>Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. <sup>29</sup>Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. <sup>30</sup>I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. <sup>31</sup>The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. <sup>32</sup>Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

### I.

It is our custom here at the First Congregational Church of Colorado Springs to observe an annual Historical Sunday. We do this on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of October each year because, according to The History of the First Congregational Church of Colorado Springs:

“The hour of 3 p.m., Sabbath Day, October 25, 1874 was appointed for the formal organization of the Church and entering into covenant and articles of faith... The sacrament was administered and a Congregational Church was formally organized with the names already received.”

These are, as it were, the opening lines in our story as a people, as a congregation, now celebrating 136 years. And so we pause to remember our story, to recall where we've been and to acknowledge how far we've come. We pause to appreciate those people, none of whom are still living, who founded a church, and who, later, built a sanctuary, this sanctuary, the oldest sanctuary in the city still used continuously by the same congregation. That would be you. That would be us.

The members of this congregation have experienced a lot over the past 136 years. Our country has been at war 8 times, including two world wars and a lingering war at the

present time. The health of the world economy has fluctuated, reaching a low point during the Great Depression. Locally, Colorado Springs, founded 4 years before the founding of our church, used to be a treeless, and largely people-less, expanse. Funded by Cripple Creek gold and marketed as a “Little London,” the city has grown into what it is today. Much of the most dramatic growth has happened during the lifetimes of some who are sitting here today. Circle Drive, I understand, used to be the boondocks. As a congregation, you have been served by 18 senior pastors, 8 interim ministers, 4 ministers of visitation, and 3 associate ministers. In addition, you’ve been served by Church School Superintendents, Deacons, and other matriarchs and patriarchs who were not ordained leaders, but whose influence rivaled or, in some cases, surpassed that of the pastors themselves.

We’ve come a long way baby, and so it is fitting to take a moment to look back, to tell the story again. We didn’t arrive here today by accident. We are here today as a result of history revealing itself. And we are here, we might claim by faith, because God reveals Godself in the life of this community, among many others, to be sure. But it is our privilege to give thanks for the ways in which God has dwelt in the midst of *this* community, and it is our calling to hope expectantly for the revealing of God in our future life together.

## II.

137 years before the founding of this church, in an article published in London, England, Rev. Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, Massachusetts, described the presence of God in his own congregation, during a time in American history known as “The Great Awakening.” Edwards wrote of the great awakening happening in his New England town:

“[In] 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God’s presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought unto them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over their husbands. The goings of God were then seen in his sanctuary, God’s day was a delight, and his tabernacles were amiable.”

Jonathan Edwards lived at a remarkable time in American History. In addition to describing what he observed happening, he also wrote and preached sermons that have become well known as among the most influential in American History, including one entitled “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” and another, everyone’s favorite fire and brimstone sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Despite the sometimes off-putting judgmentalism of his rhetoric, Edwards was an articulate and beautiful preacher, and influential as a philosopher. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy claims that “Jonathan Edwards is widely acknowledged to be America’s most important and original philosophical theologian.”

Having studied Edwards’s works in a New England seminary, imagine my delight 11 years ago when I arrived at this church and found out that the founding minister of the First Congregational Church of Colorado Springs was named Jonathan Edwards. Of course, I knew that it was not the same person - Jonathan Edwards of The Great

Awakening died in 1758 - but I was told that *our* Jonathan Edwards was a descendent of *the* Jonathan Edwards, and that was good enough for me. For 11 years now, I have been unrepentantly committing the sin of pride when giving tours of the church to visitors and potential new members. “The founding pastor of our church,” I say, “was Jonathan Edwards. Not the Jonathan Edwards, mind you, but his great-great-great-grandson. I’m not sure how many greats to add, but isn’t that great?”

Intrigued by the question of how many generations removed are the two Jonathan Edwardses, I did some research last Spring. What prompted it was a sermon I preached, a little riff on “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” called “Children in the Hands of a Loving God.” Isn’t that nice? Anyway, I tried the internet first, and found out that by googling Jonathan Edwards Colorado Springs that Jonathan Edwards is a well-known folk musician who would be playing in Colorado Springs October 16, 2010. Apparently it was a great concert.

Unable to find anything of genealogical value on the internet, I called the Congregational Library in Boston. They kindly referred me to the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale. Yale suggested I call the Forbes Library in Northampton, Massachusetts. A very helpful librarian there named Elise Bernier-Feeley told me I would need to provide the names, births, marriages, deaths of our Jonathan Edwards’s parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Well, I didn’t have any of that information. In fact, that was the information I was looking for, so I made one more attempt. I wrote back to the Northampton librarian and told her everything I knew about our Jonathan Edwards:

- He was from Dedham, Massachusetts.
- He had been educated at Phillips Academy in Andover, Yale in New Haven, and Andover Theological Seminary.
- Before coming to Colorado Springs, he had served parishes in New England and New York.
- He was the first, and, at that time, the only, professor of The Colorado College.
- Finally, he was the brother-in-law of Thomas Nelson Haskell, founder of Colorado College, founded May 6, 1874.

Ms. Bernier-Feeley wrote back ecstatic. (At least, I thought it was an ecstatic response, as much as I could tell in an email from a New England librarian.) She told me I had provided an important clue, mentioning that Thomas Haskell and Jonathan Edwards were brothers-in-law. Thomas Haskell married Anna Eliza Edwards, daughter of Justin Edwards of Andover in 1855. So, the good news was that we had established a link between our Jonathan Edwards and a known family line.

But then, the bad news. Ms. Bernier-Feeley wrote: “The progenitor of the family of your Jonathan was Alexander Edwards, always referred to as the ‘Welshman’ in early Northampton records. He arrived in Northampton in about 1655, having first settled in Springfield, Massachusetts. I am absolutely sure that if your Rev. Jonathan Edwards was the son of Justin Edwards, he has absolutely NO connection to the Edwards family from which the Reverend Jonathan Edwards, author of the Great Awakening in Northampton descends. [*That*] Jonathan Edwards descended from an Edwards family which came from London, England and settled in Hartford, Connecticut.”

“Suffice it to say,” she concluded, “we are dealing with two different Edwards families who happened to have a connection with Northampton, but of whom it may be said that their familial origins are worlds apart.” And then, as if to rub salt into the open wound of my disillusionment, she signed off, “Cordially, Elise Bernier-Feeley, Local History and Genealogy Librarian, Hampshire Room for Local History, Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts.” (Despite my poking fun, I am grateful to Ms. Bernier-Feeley for her help and, hopefully, sense of humor.)

### III.

Now, I know, some of you could care less about this history stuff. And others of you, while interested in history, could care less to hear the results of the question, “Would the real Jonathan Edwards please stand up?” And that’s fine. I won’t try to convince you otherwise. But since our scripture reading this morning is drawn from the writings of the prophet Joel, I just want to point out that the stories we tell ourselves matter:

- The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves matter.
- The stories we tell ourselves about others matter.
- The stories we tell ourselves about how the world works matter.
- The stories we tell ourselves about who God is and how God works matter.

I met with a consultant recently who has a husband who is a fiction writer. She said that he has a shirt that says, “I make things up.” While that is well and good for a writer of fiction, this consultant said, “in consulting with groups of people who have to live and work with each other, I want to hand out t-shirts that say, ‘I won’t make things up.’” In other words, very often, the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, who others are, how the world works, and who God may or may not be true. We may think they are true because we’ve been telling them for so long. And perhaps the only way to test whether our stories are true is to try telling a new story.

This was the role of the biblical prophets. They were not magical foretellers of the future. They were deeply embedded and invested in the present life of Israel. But they also had a deep understanding of the founding stories and myths of their people. And they were called by God to articulate new story lines. In some cases, this meant re-telling the past in a way to help the people take stock of their current predicament. In other cases, this meant imagining a future in which God’s promise would be reiterated and God’s blessing would be restored.

The book of Joel begins with a story about destruction, symbolized by swarms of locusts that devour crops and cause widespread famine. Locusts are sometimes described as “the incarnation of hunger.” The opening words of Joel admonish the elders of Israel to tell the next generation this story of destruction. Verse 3: “Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and the children another generation.” Verse 4: “What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten.”

Tell this story, says Joel: Do not forget that destruction is the means by which God sometimes speaks.

Then the story changes a bit. Humans are not just at the whim of nature’s destructive processes. In chapter 2, verses 15 and 16, Joel implores, “Blow the trumpet in Zion;

sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast...” Then, in verse 17: “Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O Lord... Why should other people say about us, ‘Where is their God?’”

Tell *this* story, says Joel: Do not forget to turn back to God, who has brought you safe thus far.

In the very next verse, the story changes again. Chapter 2, verse 18: “Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people.” Wow! That a curse by God’s own hand could be reversed by movement in God’s own heart!

Tell *this* story, says Joel: Do not forget that God is a sucker for the land and for you, the people. God cannot help but love you.

In the passage we heard today, the story changes again. “O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice.” Referring to the locusts of chapter 1, verse 25 of chapter two reads: I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you.

Tell *this* story, says Joel: God is the one who will restore the earth to fruitfulness and health.

Finally, Joel gets apocalyptic, which means to say the story changes again, this time to describe a future as yet unimagined: God will dwell in the midst of the people. A “new exhalation of the divine breath” will come upon the people, all ages, all genders, including the poor and the powerless. The old will start dreaming amazing dreams again. The young will begin to catch a glimpse of God’s future. Even those who thought they were helpless, will be showered with God’s breath.

#### IV.

The story changes, but God remains the same.  
The God of destitution is also the God of delight.  
The God of pain is also the God of power.  
The God of judgment is also the God of forgiveness.  
The God of pitfalls is also the God of possibilities.  
The God of history is also the herald of the future.

For Christians, the great assurance of this truth is the verse, found in Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” The story changes and we change with it. Biblically speaking, even God changes, changes God’s mind, changes the story. But, also biblically speaking, God’s promise remains the same, articulated in many places and at many times, but perhaps most clearly in Leviticus, chapter 26, verse 12: “I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people.”

The story changes and we change, maybe even God changes, but God’s promise remains the same: “I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people.” Amen.