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Sermon Transcript: Seen. Heard. Loved.

For a while now, I've been whining about my back, having a lot of back pain. But I finally this week got to go see the physical therapist. And I—I need to tell you about this angel of the Lord, this deliverer of mercies named Colleen, who's a physical therapist at Apex Network Physical Therapy where I went. And it wasn't that there was a miraculous healing that happened, but I went there and sat down, you know, we did the little interview: "Okay, tell me where your pain is," and blah blah blah blah, you know. With physical therapy, I never know what to expect because it's just like I could do this for weeks and then have nothing come of it, you know, and it's just—it's not always a good feeling.

But she started to do different—you know, examination: "Okay, put your hands up like this. Okay, don't—I'm going to press. Don't let me move your hand and do this and stretch this way and tell me what hurts more, what hurts less." And then she said things to me like, "Okay, now I'm going to test your shoulder, but I know it's not your shoulder, but I got to test your shoulder, but I know it's not your shoulder, but we're going to do it anyway." And then as I started to do the things with the shoulder, she goes, "Does that hurt?" And I said, "Um, no," but she goes, "But I bet you feel it here." And she put her finger on the exact spot on my back where the pain was. I felt like she did a magic trick, right? Like she read my mind before. And then we do another stretch and she said, "I bet you felt that right here." And then she put her finger right on the spot where I was feeling it. I'm like, "This woman can read my mind." Or more likely, she's just very good at what she does.

And while I'll admit that doing all these stretches and moving, it didn't actually make my back feel better in the moment—in fact, it felt worse, I was—it was more sore at the end of all this examination—but I felt better because somebody heard my pain, recognized my pain, could identify my pain, and that gave me hope. Sometimes it's just nice to be seen and heard and not just told something like, "Well, you know, you're in your 50s now." That's not a medical diagnosis! But to have someone say, "No, I know where what's happening and it's right here, and there's some things we can try," just to have the pain heard and known and understood.

Then came the little turn in our conversation where she gave me homework to do. And I don't know about you, but this is always my least favorite thing about physical therapy, is that then they give you work to do. "I'll go home and do these exercises. Oh, look, there's an app you can download and it will track whether you did it or not. Oh, great. Accountability." I didn't need that with my physical therapy. I actually am supposed to do work as part of this process as well. Okay. But I will say there was just something really good about that. And I have hope. I have hope for what's to come because I've been seen. I've been heard. My pain has been identified. And we have some things to try, even if it means I have some work to do.

And after I left that appointment, I thought, "I wonder if Colleen has read the book of Joel, because it feels like I'm experiencing the book of Joel right now."

Snarky Gods and the Valley of Decision

Joel looks out and answers a few key questions for us. Before I dig into the bigger picture of what those three key questions are that we've been exploring all month long, we need to deal with these last little verses. Because if you've been to church all this month, you just read the book of Joel; we did every little verse of it. And in this last little bit, we get—I don't know how else to express this to you—snarky God. I mean, it's quite a snarky little response.

Some of you thought, "Hey, that scripture sounds familiar, but a little bit off. I thought it said, 'You beat your swords into plowshares.'" But in Joel, it said, "Oh no, get out your plowshares and beat them into swords." He's not rousing up the people of Israel; he's taunting the enemy. God is saying, "All you nations who have oppressed my people, who have ravaged them, who have hurt them—yeah, go get your swords and meet me in the valley. Oh, and by the way, you might want to get your plowshare out and beat them into swords. Bring that, too. Oh, even the weaklings among you, yeah, let them tell themselves they're warriors. Bring them in, too. I'm going to deal with you."

Now, I don't know about you, but this once again—Joel gives me a set of verses where I go, "This doesn't feel like the kind of God—where is Jesus around somewhere to make this nicer?" You know, what we have to remember again and again is that these are words that were written 2,500 years ago. We read crazy stuff from the 60s and things wacko, all right? This is 2,500 years ago in another country, in another culture, in another language, a completely different worldview. And what we understand is the prophet was speaking words to them in—in metaphors and in phrasings that they would understand, because there's a bigger message that Joel's trying to get across. And all this is to say, "Look, God sees what the bad people have been doing, and God will have justice for this. God's going to handle it."

If you want a big translation across all this stuff that Joel just threw at you in the last couple verses, it's like, "God's going to handle it." Now, for you people, my people, here's what I have for you: I got some more bread and some wine and water and a fountain that you didn't dig, that you didn't work for, that you didn't earn. And there will be relief from the famine and the hurting that you've had before. The response to all of this comes in the form of—again, we got bread and wine and now a fountain that nobody earned or did any work for, but it's given as a gift. And that's how we wrap up this book of Joel.

The Three Questions of Joel

And when you put it all together, Joel is really—when you dig through this 2,500-year-old text and try to figure out what's going on with it—Joel's really getting at three basic questions.

The first is: What do we do when all has been taken from us? Or maybe another way to say it is: What do we do when we feel the brokenness and the ugliness of the world crashing down on us? What do we do in those moments? And what Joel said is we assemble, we come together, and we give words to our pain. We lament together. We speak the words out loud of what is wrong, and we name it, and we draw comfort from that, because sometimes it's nice to know that someone else is experiencing that very pain, and it makes the pain that we're experiencing feel seen and heard and understood.

The second question that Joel is addressing is: What can we expect from God when all is taken

away? Or what can we expect from God when the brokenness is crashing into our world and we're seeing the burden of that all around us? And Joel doesn't sugarcoat it. Joel is not—Joel would never get hired by the Hallmark Channel to write a movie because he doesn't say it's just everything's going to be taken care of right away for you. You remember what Joel said? Let's go ahead and let's cry out to our God and let's share our pain with our God. And will God do something about it right away for us? Will God bring a blessing to us? And Joel says, "Who knows? Who knows?"

It's a bit how I felt going in that physical therapy appointment: "Am I going to feel any better at the end of this? Who knows?" And yet, it was still good to be seen and heard and understood. And Joel says, "In your pain and your suffering, it is still good to be seen and heard." And here's what you can expect from God:

1. God might bring a blessing in response to the pain you're experiencing, and wraps it with a big fat "who knows." It's not the Hallmark Channel; it's real life, everybody.
2. The second thing that Joel makes sure that you understand about what you expect from God is that God will take an account of what has happened. God registers. Someone else might gaslight you out of—out of your explanation, your understanding of what's going on, but God saw what actually happened. And God takes an account of the pain and the suffering and the burdens that you see, and God sees it clearly, and God has justice and goodness planned, but it just may not happen on your timescale. It might even be something that has to extend over a generation. But God is working a plan of goodness and justice.

And we're meant to trust that—to trust the character of God, because what we're involved in with God is not a transaction. Like, well, if you just pray the right way and you do the right things and you donate enough money, then gosh, God will just pour out the blessings for exactly what you want. You know it doesn't work that way, not just because you read it in your Bible or heard it in Joel's prophecy; you know this from real life. You know you're not living in a Hallmark movie, right? I mean, you might save the Christmas tree farm, but it doesn't mean that everything's going to work out at the end. Life is messy. It's broken. But we have a faith in a God who's able to see it all, take an account for it all. And ultimately, we trust that there is a plan of what is good and just and right. Even if it means we might have a little homework to do along the way, you and I have to exercise our faith in the midst of it.

And that's what leads to the third big question of Joel, which is: How will we recognize that God's doing anything? How do we see God's response? If you look at the way Joel presented this to us—all these grand, horrible things happening—and Joel comes back to let you know that there's going to be bread and wine and a fountain. It's little things. You might know this from your Bible, you might know this from the prophet Joel, but I bet you know this from the experience of your life, and that is that the blessings often come in little packages of life, in little moments. And that's part of the homework that you and I are given, the exercises we're supposed to do to participate in the healing over what is broken. It's often little things. It's a phone call. It's a moment of caring. It's a

little bit of effort for someone.

You know, right now there's a small stack outside of our sanctuary with 40 toddler clothes, and it has a note on it that says "Family 770." And I tell you, there is power in those little clothes. There is the mercy and justice and kindness and peace of God in that little stack of 40 clothes. That's part of the homework we have. We come together and we be the church together and we hear the lament around us.

A Community Fashioned in Lament

You realize what we do here in church is not just trying to like give you a little boost to send you out for the week, but we come and create a space where it is okay to express your pain, your brokenness. We actually had you fill out forms about your specific confessions in the beginning of the series, and we've been using it to inform our prayers of confession ever since. And you know that every just about every week there's a moment given for silent confession to clearly communicate that your personal brokenness, your failings of faithfulness are welcome here and can be part of our lament and sorrow together, and there's space for it. No one expects you to show up just nailing that Christian thing, killing it out there. We begin with the expectation that you got something to confess. And then we remind ourselves of the character of God who gives us forgiveness. It may not solve all that brokenness in the next 20 minutes or even 20 days of your life, but there is forgiveness for you, and we sing praise about that.

We also make space in here for you to bring the brokenness that you see out there, also the joys and the celebrations, to lift up in gratitude to God in prayer. But we make space for you to look at what is broken out there, overwhelming, what has been taken away, and to express that, and then we make that our prayers together. And when it's too painful for you to write down on a slip of paper or say out loud, we make space for silent prayer, and we make that our prayer together. And every once in a while, we really press you hard on: "We know you have other sufferings. We know you have other needs." And they are welcome here. You understand what we're creating here is a sacred community fashioned in the same way that Joel was pleading to the community to see, is that the people of God in the midst of even the greatest suffering should gather together, and when they gather together, they should feel free to express that so that they can be heard and seen and understood. And with every need that comes forward—maybe it's not something physical like a stack of toddler clothes, maybe it's just being willing to go out to a neighbor's yard and clear a backyard for them, maybe it's being willing to pray for a concern for 30 days straight—make no mistake, we are creating a community of faith that is determined to make space for being broken and to say, "You are seen. You are heard. You are understood. And we're going to see what we can do to be part of those little responses that we're all meant to look for, the little responses of God."

The Abundance of Grace

Now, maybe you're walking into church this Sunday and you're thinking, "Oh no, Pastor Rob, my life is nothing but roses and sunshine and lollipops; I've got nothing going wrong in my life, I feel no burdens, I feel no pains." Well, then hallelujah! You ought to come marching into this place ready to praise God and give thanks over and over and over again. And then you ought to be looking around to find out, "Well, who in here isn't doing so good so I can use this abundance and surplus

of joy that's overflowing out of my cup to fill theirs?" Because this is a place for you to come when you're broken. It's a place for you to come even when you're feeling great.

Now, what I suspect is that none of you fits neatly into either of these two categories, that you've all got a bit of brokenness and you got a bit of really awesomeness, and some days it's hard to see the other. And so we come, a bunch of imperfect vessels with imperfect faith, but we come together so we can be seen and heard and understood. And who knows, maybe a blessing will flow precisely in that spot, in precisely that time that you need it. But we are going to be a people who trust that God has work for us to do. There is goodness in that work. And we will trust that God ultimately is listening and doing what is good.

That's what it is to be the church. And Joel, with all this crazy imagery and all this 2,500-year-old understanding of things, is still speaking to us today, saying: "God sees you. Let's see one another. God loves you. Let's love one another."

Hallelujah and amen.