

Joel 2:23-32

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. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. 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. 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. 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. Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old man shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, Blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. 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.

“Then afterwards . . . GRACE”

America is taking a deeper look at religion these days. PBS has recently aired a three night TV program, “God in America.” The series examines America’s religious history and the way in which differing personal experiences and institutional doctrines of God have shaped our society and nation. It portrays American history as *waves of mini-dramas: challenges to religious order, the rise of concepts of political liberty, the establishment of First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and religion---and the fits and starts of working out what it means to be nation without one state-sanctioned religion. Each generation made righteous claims for social justice, for God on their side in combat, for the truths they wanted to teach their children* (quote from USA Today.com, p. 3)

In addition to “God In America,” co-authors Paul Froese and Christopher Bader have also published the book, “America’s Four

Gods: What We Say About God---And What That Says About Us.” Their book was based on a 2008 survey of 1,648 people in which questions like: If you pray to God, to whom—or what—are you praying? And, when you sing, whose blessing are you seeking? were asked. The results suggested that nine out of ten Americans believe in God and that our personal picture of God reveals our attitudes on economics, justice, social morality, war, natural disasters, science, politics, love and more. According to the survey, the personal God that Americans envision and its correlation within society clustered into four categories: The Authoritative God; The Benevolent God; The Critical; The Distant God.

The Authoritative God

When conservatives Sarah Palin or Glenn Beck proclaim that America will lose God’s favor unless we get right with him, they’re rallying believers in what Froese and Bader call an Authoritative God, one engaged in history and meting our harsh punishment to those who do not follow him. About 28% of the nation shares this view, according to Baylor’s 2008 findings. “They divide the world by good and evil and appeal to people who are worried, concerned and scared,” Froese says. “They respond to a powerful God guiding this country and if we don’t explicitly talk about (that) God, then we have the wrong God or no God at all.”

The Benevolent God.

When President Obama says he is driven to live out his Christian faith in public service, or political satirist Stephen Colbert mentions God while testifying to Congress in favor of changing immigration laws, they’re speaking of what the Baylor researchers call a Benevolent God. This God is engaged in our world and loves and supports us in caring for others, a vision shared by 22% of Americans, according to Baylor’s findings. “Rhetoric that talks about the righteous vs. the heathen doesn’t appeal to them” Froese says. “Their God is a force for good who cares for all people, weeps at all conflicts and will comfort all.” Asked about the Baylor findings, Philip Yancey, author of What Good Is God?, says he moved from the Authoritative God of his youth---“a scowling, super-policeman in the sky, waiting to smash someone having a good time” ---to a “God like a doctor who has my best

interest at heart, even if sometimes I don't like his diagnosis or prescriptions."

The Critical God.

The poor, the suffering and the exploited in this world often believe in a Critical God who keeps an eye on this world but delivers justice in the next, Bader says. Bader says this view of God---held by 21% of Americans---was reflected in a sermon at a working-class neighborhood church the researchers visited in Rifle, Colo, in 2008. Pastor Del Whittington's theme at Open Door Church was "Wait until heaven, and accounts will be settled." Bader says Whittington described how "'our cars that are breaking down here will be chariots in heaven. Our empty bank accounts will be storehouses with the Lord.'"

The Distant God.

Though about 5% of Americans are atheists or agnostic, Baylor found that nearly one in four (24%) see a Distant God that booted up the universe, then left humanity alone. This doesn't mean that such people have no religion. It's the dominant view of . . . major world religions. Rabbi Jamie Gorngold of Boulder, Col. took Baylor's God quiz and clicked with the Distant God view 'that gives me more personal responsibility. There's no one that can fix things if I mess them up. God's not telling me what I should do,' says Korngold. Her upcoming book, *God Envy: A Rabbi's Confession*, is subtitled, *A book for People Who Don't Believe God Can Intervene in Their Lives and Why Judaism Is Still Important*. Others who cite a Distant God identify more with the spiritual and speak of the unknowable God behind the creation of rainbows, mountains or elegant mathematical theorems, the Baylor writers found. This distant view is nothing new, Benjamin Franklin once wrote that he could not imagine that a 'Supremely Perfect' God cares a whit for "such an inconsiderable Nothing as Man."

Truth is, there is nothing new about any of these visions of God, or the human capacity to create a personal concept of God. Neither is there anything new about our mind's ability to change our concept and understanding of God over the years, or about faith's capacity to re-shape our economic, social, and political attitudes, values, principles, morals, and spirituality.

In our reading from today's scriptures, we find the prophet Joel trying to change Israel's mindset of powerlessness, helplessness, and hopelessness by transforming their vision of God. In order to revise and update their vision, he gave his prophetic version of who God is and what The Creator does for God's beloved children.

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.

The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

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.

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.

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.

According to Hebrew piety, meditation on these words of the Lord, will open a person's heart and mind to the presence of God and to the transforming power of GRACE. GRACE, in this scripture, is the gift of God's dreams for humanity and the courage to enact God's vision here on earth. **Then afterwards . . .**

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh . . .

And everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord.

. . . will be saved.

Let us pray. Gracious God, open our hearts and minds that we might better understand who you are and how you would have us live. For our transformation by your Love, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.