*Spring follows winter, as sun follows rain;*

*with thunder comes lightning, it's always the same.*

*The world keeps on rolling through day, month and year;*

*the sun needs no telling that daybreak is here.
(Robin Mann)*

The American writer Susan Sontag once said, ‘Time exists in order that everything doesn’t happen all at once, and space exists so that it doesn’t all happen to you’.

Linear, sequential time is the pattern western society has constructed in order to make sense of reality. European languages are constructed of tenses; time is woven into the very fabric. We think in time sequences. History is viewed as lineal and sequential.

It’s hard to imagine how very differently time was understood in many earlier civilizations. Most of our ancestors understood time as cyclical, with recurring patterns, overlapping one another in the manner of the seasons, the phases of the moon, the tides, night and day. There were times of evil and times of good, times for celebratory festivals and natural calamities. To every season….. (*Other Ways of Knowing: Recharting Our Future with Ageless Wisdom, John Broomfield)*

Maoris (New Zealand) say they stand facing the past, with the ancestors, guardians of tradition, guiding them backward into the unseen future. The notion of ‘walking backwards into the future’ *(Ihimaera 1998a: 200)* describes the value we can gain from remembering and understanding our past in order to best prepare for a better tomorrow.

For Aboriginal people, the Dreamtime is the beginning, but it exists now, parallel to the present, entered into by dreams, in visions, and on walkabout, when the Songlines are sung anew to invoke the past into the present.

The meaning of the idea that Indigenous peoples walk backwards into the future transforms history from a mere record of the past to a living narrative practice - which is exactly what we encounter in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the writing of the prophet Joel, a locust plague has devastated the land, the economy and the people. Bark has been stripped from trees, food has vanished, seeds have shrivelled, granaries now stand empty, cattle moan from hunger and thirst, and streams evaporate into dry creek beds. Joel interprets this natural disaster as a spiritual sign. It’s time to take notice.

In response to this scarcity, God promises “abundant rain”, and, in turn, a super abundance of grain, and vats overflowing with wine and oil. In our way of viewing time, it seems this may be a promise in the remote and distant future when God will bless the people, when God’s Spirit will be poured out on them.

How long do people need to wait for this to actually happen?

Now, the ancient people were less compartmentalised with their understanding of time than ‘past, present and future’. Time was cyclical. Blessing and abundance, deprivation and calamity - are all part of the endless weaving and intersecting in people’s lived experiences. In so many of the Psalms there is this intersection of stating how things are in the present, and of remembering God’s gracious actions and bringing them into the present - anticipating the future by remembering the stories of faith and faithfulness.

It’s why we continue to re-tell the narratives of our spiritual ancestors, it’s why we sing the hymns of our heritage. Walking backwards into the future, guided by the wisdom of the spiritual ancestors, the great cloud of witnesses. Holding the traditions of the past, not as nostalgia, but as part of what shapes us for the future.

We tend to be much more existential and individual, living in the present subjective moment, with whatever joy or sorrow that exists in that moment, or sequence of moments.

I wonder, what might we learn from the experience of blessing **in the midst of** calamity, generosity in the midst of deprivation, where we may notice more fully the way things overlap, intertwine. How might we be able to hold together the joys with the sorrows, the complaint with the praise, all a part of the tapestry of one story, rather than the experience of disconnected and sometimes overwhelming episodic living? How might this approach hold a mirror up to our experience of getting stuck in the moment, when the sorrows and complaints hover like a shadow over us, such that life lacks colour and vigour and joy?

What the prophets like Joel do is ‘forth-tell’ the implications of our living, while at the same time they cast a positive vision for the people. While speaking about God’s judgement, the prophets offer pastoral comfort - they keep alive the dreams of God’s people in times of disaster and discouragement. Cradling hope in the present. Expecting that in any moment the things that hold us captive will intersect with all that is life-giving. The weft and weave of our living. And into our lived reality we draw our hope from God’s grace and mercy, ever-present with us.

Walter Brueggemann captures this dual role of the prophets when he says that the prophets both criticized and energized. On the one hand, they disturbed the status quo. They questioned the reigning order of things. They viewed the normal state of affairs in a different light, and advocated a new way of seeing and living — personally, socially, spiritually, economically, politically, in short, in every dimension of life. The prophets afflicted the comfortable and the complacent.

But they also comforted the afflicted. They intended to “generate hope, affirm identity, and create a new future”. They offered more than a negative critique; they were also about positive affirmation and encouragement. When Israel was in exile, feeling forgotten by Yahweh, the prophets consoled them with hope. If you've ever felt despair over a hopeless situation, the prophets have a word for you. Yes, they dished out the vinegar; but they also gave us honey for the heart.

In our own lives we can get stuck in those difficult times, but perhaps we can step back enough to see that God is present even when we feel there is an aching void in our lives; that hope lives on even when things seem most desperate; that human flourishing is possible even in the midst of troubles. I wonder, in what ways does this speak into your situation, and into our community?