

## “Locust Invasion”

*Minor Prophets, Major Implications – sermon #2*

Joel 2:1-11

I have to admit, the irony of this worship service today is not lost on me. Last week, as the band was practicing, we were joking about singing words like “cold”, “bitter”, “winter”, and “storm”. And then, with my family stuck in East Tawas for four days, I got a first-hand glimpse of what a real storm can do. I even learned a new word for snow: graupel – the small, granular balls of ice that look like sand grains and sting when they hit your face. Last weekend was a reminder of the awesome power of our Creator God.

Joel is a book of prophecy about another incredible force of nature, a locust storm. He starts out chapter 1 with these words:

Hear this, you elders;

listen, all who live in the land.

Has anything like this ever happened in your days

or in the days of your ancestors?

<sup>3</sup>Tell it to your children,

and let your children tell it to their children,

and their children to the next generation.

<sup>4</sup>What the locust swarm has left

the great locusts have eaten;

what the great locusts have left

the young locusts have eaten;

what the young locusts have left

other locusts<sup>[a]</sup> have eaten. (Joel 1:2-4, NIV)

If you replace the word “locust” with “snow,” I think we can find a parallel here: “What the snow didn’t cover, the sleet covered. What the sleet didn’t

cover, the freezing rain covered; what the freezing rain didn't cover, the graupel covered."

How many years from now will we be talking about the "Snow of April '18"? Will we tell our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren about it? Why?

We have an inherent fear and awe of the power of nature. There is a reason insurance agencies call storms and other natural disasters "acts of God." The Bible teaches that God controls the weather. We don't control it, that's for sure! Storms are terrible and beautiful, and frustrating, because they make us feel powerless and vulnerable.

The trouble with the book of Joel is that it is hard for us to compare a locust storm to anything we would ever experience. After our winter storm, the power came back on. Any effects might have lingered for a few days, but eventually, life returned to normal.

Not so with a locust storm. A locust storm is probably best compared to a forest fire. The destruction wreaked on the ancient farming community in Israel was unimaginable. They had no pesticides to control outbreaks. They had no grocery stores to buy more food. For Israel, there was nothing they could do.

In the ancient world, people feared these terrible locust storms. The Bible tells us sometimes God sent locust plagues as punishment and calls to repent, such as in the story of Moses and Pharaoh (Exodus 10). Locusts would not just destroy the food and vegetation; locusts left hunger, poverty, and disease in their wake. There was no place to go and buy food from non-infested areas, and no money to buy it even if you could. Locust storms could last for days; their impact could last months or years.

Joel describes this locust invasion as a mighty army with teeth of a lion (1:6). The devastation is terrible. People and cattle starve. Trees and vines are completely stripped. Joel portrays this storm as darkness and gloom, a spreading blackness, worse than a fire. The locusts are compared to a vast, terrible army capable of scaling walls and infiltrating cities. They literally block out the sun and moon for days. The locust plague is powerful, unstoppable, and relentless. Joel is right to sound the alarm. This is bad. Very, very bad.

We don't know much about Joel's life, or even the time when he wrote his scroll. But the beautiful thing about this book is it doesn't really matter; the message Joel preaches is timeless. People have always wondered how to interpret natural disasters. Did we do something to deserve this? Is God angry?

Let me caution you: the Bible does not say that every natural disaster is a result of God's judgment. Let me repeat that: Not every disaster is a result of God's judgment. There are certainly some things that we bring upon ourselves, and other events are simply demonstrations of the powerful forces of nature. Joel does not say that the locust storm is a definitive sign of the end of the world, but he certainly believes there is a lesson to be learned in the aftermath.

You might have never experienced a locust storm before, but I'll bet you have experienced a disaster. What was your response? Did you become angry with God? Did you shake your fist at the heavens and shout, "Why did you let this happen?" Even if we don't believe God caused the disaster, we do believe God could have prevented it or mitigated it. So what is our reaction in the face of pain and death? We look for someone to blame, don't we? Blame is a natural part of grief.

Joel had a much different response. Let me read you his words, starting in verse 12, after the locust storm has past.

"Even now," declares the LORD,  
"return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting and weeping and mourning."

<sup>13</sup>Rend your heart  
and not your garments.

Return to the LORD your God,  
for he is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and abounding in love,  
and he relents from sending calamity.

<sup>14</sup>Who knows? He may turn and relent  
and leave behind a blessing... (Joel 2:12-14)

Return to God. Fast. Weep. Mourn. Repent. These scriptures are a part of Ash Wednesday services for good reason. Lent is a time of admitting our brokenness and returning to God. These actions are not easy, nor should they be. They are serious. Why should we even do this?

Joel tells us: maybe God will reconsider and spare us. God is compassionate and can be moved. Moses even interceded for his people once (Exodus 32). God was so angry he threatened to destroy Israel, and Moses pleaded for them. The Bible tells us it is possible for God to change God's mind. But Joel also notes that God cannot be controlled, cannot be bribed.

Disasters are about God and about our reaction. What is your response? Do you curse God and turn away? Do you try on your own to overcome an unstoppable force? Or do you repent and turn toward God? Our response determines our faith, and our faith determines our response.

I have never known a real disaster, not in the way that the locusts decimated Israel. The closest event I have from my life is being fired and facing unemployment. I did not think my life was in any immediate danger, but let me tell you, my anxiety was very real. Through those tough times, people reached out and helped support my family, even helping me find a new job and enter pastoral ministry.

The main thing was, I had a choice. It was a church that had let me go, and as a family, we decided to still attend worship there when we could. It was one of the hardest decisions we ever made. We were not trying to impress people with false humility. We were not trying to make the church leaders feel guilty. I owned the actions that led to my dismissal. There was no going back. But I made the intentional decision to worship God and to continue seeking the Lord in the fellowship of a Christian community.

I made that choice. And let me tell you, it is not a common one. When we are angry, bitter, lost, hopeless, and at the end of our ropes, it is not a natural decision to humble ourselves and seek God. You have the choice whether or not to believe me: Returning to church and to God was the best choice our family ever made.

Out of the depths of my disaster and despair, I found hope in the Lord. By choosing to remain faithful to Jesus and his Bride, the Church, I saw how God's plan for my life continued to unfold. But first I had to work through my despair.

Joel gives a very specific order of events and responses. First: there is a disaster. Second: the people humble themselves and repent. Third: God restores the people. And finally, God sends new prophets to his people.

In Joel 2:28-29, God says,

“And afterward,  
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
your old men will dream dreams,  
your young men will see visions.  
<sup>29</sup>Even on my servants, both men and women,  
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”

It is important that we understand how this all ends. The disaster does not have the final word. God does.

“Hope has the last word. The locust threat will pass. God will deliver the people in their time of suffering. Since God is a God of justice, good will triumph over evil. Both the first section of Joel (1:2–2:27) and the second section (2:28–3:21) end with words of hope.”<sup>1</sup>

“In a sinful world of rebellious people, much suffering and hardship exists. Joel and other prophets do not deny this harsh reality. But, invariably, they do not leave the reader in despair to wonder if God has abandoned the people and left them without hope. Destruction and loss (whether from locusts or a multitude of other possibilities) is never the final word from God. As God has come to save throughout the history of God’s people, God will save again.”<sup>2</sup>

Think of it this way: when you endure disaster and remain faithful to God, you become a prophet. A prophet is God’s spokesperson, someone who speaks the truth about God. You may not end up writing a book, but you could. What matters is, your testimony of how God restored you is what others need to hear.

I asked earlier, what will we be telling our children and grandchildren about our experiences? Joel makes the case that every generation needs to know their

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<sup>1</sup> Simundson, Daniel J. *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005). Accessed through <http://www.ministrymatters.com/reader/9781426750564/#chapter3.html#ch3>, April 19, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

past in order to relate to God in the future. That even means telling our stories of failure and disaster. In American history, we need to spend time reflecting on awful events such as slavery, racism, and mistreatment of Native Americans. We need to talk about environmental disasters, riots, and wars. Joel is certain that God uses every moment in history to send us a message. These may not be happy moments – in fact, the more bitter they are, the more likely they are to be remembered. “Among other things, the locust disaster showed that God will act to bring punishment to those who turn away from God, and God will restore and forgive even if the suffering was deserved.”<sup>3</sup> If we refuse to listen to that message, we risk facing similar suffering and losing hope. “The past can serve as warning and promise—showing the seriousness of sin, the consequence of bad behavior, and the promise of a future in which God never leaves the faithful forever in misery.”<sup>4</sup>

Our purpose is not to search for the reason for every terrible event, especially if we try to assign the blame to ourselves. But I am utterly convinced that God can and will use every disaster to communicate to us, if we will listen.

Is it possible that God can use your terrible situation to call you to prophesy – to be God’s voice of truth? I know many people who have a ministry based on their experience of tragedy and grief. A mom’s group started in our church this past month, not because great things were happening, but because parents felt burdened by disasters in our schools – drugs and bullying. They chose not to ignore the pain, but to embrace it and look for hope in God’s Word. That is incredible.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Joel believes that the locust plague is a supernatural event which must be the result of God’s passion. The prophet’s reaction is to call for repentance. Even in the face of disaster, the people still believe that God can save them. They remind themselves that God is merciful and compassionate and slow to anger, but nonetheless they recognize that God can get angry. The people’s response is to gather together to worship God, not to curse God.

We might never know why calamities happen. But we can look to the future and commit our ways to the Lord. We can trust the one true God and move forward in confidence. God will be with us. The past does not have to destroy us; it can redirect us to a better relationship with God in the days to come.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION – UMH 893

**Pastor: Lord, we confess our day-to-day failure to be truly human.**

People: Lord, we confess to you.

**Pastor: Lord, we confess that we often fail to love with all we have and are, often because we do not fully understand what loving means, often because we are afraid of risking ourselves.**

People: Lord, we confess to you.

**Pastor: Lord, we cut ourselves off from each other and we erect barriers of division.**

People: Lord, we confess to you.

**Pastor: Lord, we confess that by silence and ill-considered word, we have built up walls of prejudice.**

People: Lord, we confess to you.

**Pastor: Lord, we confess that by selfishness and lack of sympathy...**

People: ...we have stifled generosity and left little time for others.

**ALL: Holy Spirit, speak to us. Help us to listen to your word of forgiveness, for we are very deaf. Come, fill this moment and free us from sin.**

Memory Verse: Joel 2:12a

"Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."

Reflection Questions:

1. What is the worst disaster you have ever faced? How did you cope?
2. Do you believe God controls the weather? Why or why not? Why do you think God allows natural disasters?
3. Has a tragedy ever drawn you closer to God? Further away from God? Why?
4. How have you used your pain and grief to prophecy (tell the truth about God)? Have you used your experience to help others?
5. Spend some time in confession and prayer. Be honest with God about your past, and ask God to help direct your future.