



First United Church of Oak Park

Anytime, Anywhere
Joel 2:22-32
The Rev. John Edgerton
October 27, 2019

The book of the prophet Joel is a mystery. Within its scant four chapters there is precious little by way of social context or location. There is no indication of when this prophecy was written. There is no mention of Nebuchadnezzar or Sennacherib the great, or Cyrus who is called the anointed, no sense of world events that would tell you when it is that this prophecy is talking about. This prophecy could be about any time. There is not even a description of who this prophet is, where Joel was born, or some account of how Joel became a prophet. Even the name Joel just means “the Lord is God.” It’s hardly a name at all so much as a cypher, a code that makes the message of the book the name of the one who speaks it—God is God. The prophet could be anyone.

The main thing that the book of Joel concerns itself with is a plague of locusts. That is no help, either, for understanding the social context. Locust plagues are like floods or droughts: hey, it can happen. But the book of Joel dwells on this locust plague and describes well the horror of it.

What makes a locust plague so horrible is that it starts with something that is not so unmanageable. Just a grasshopper in the garden, eating away some of the flower buds. Easily dealt with. But no sooner is that one grasshopper chased away than two have taken its place. And by the time those are chased off, they are everywhere. A swarm of grasshoppers, a plague of them. Locusts are what you call them, when they are devouring everything in sight. These little things—any one of which could be dealt with—day after day, week after week, not moving on from a place until it is truly picked bare. The realization comes crashing like a wave of despair; my God, they just keep coming, they never stop.

That’s what so terrible about a plague of locusts—the way that it eats away at hope. Day after day, so that it seems that nothing will work and there is no purpose even in trying. Despair: that is what a locust plague does, it beats a people.

And it is just at that time, when the people themselves felt empty of resources to resist disaster, it was just then there began to be strange appearances. Odd occurrences that make a person wonder: what is happening? Portents in the heavens, signs on the earth. The creamy-white moon turned blood red; when has such a thing occurred? The sun enveloped in shadow; who has seen something like that? Smoky mist on the horizon like a liberating army on the march. What was going on?

God stepped in and took action; God took action in the midst of disaster. Though not the way I might guess. God does not sweep a great flood down to wash the locusts away. No, there was a flood, instead, of God’s Spirit. A torrent of divine inspiration—dreams captivated the young, and visions of what might be overtook the aged; words of moral-courage sprung from the mouths of those who were normally measured in their speech. The oppressed and the imprisoned, they too were given words from God to scream out against the folly of their chains.

Prophecy. That is what God poured out in the midst of hopelessness. Prophecy. That is, understanding truly what the present is like, and seeing clearly what a new future might be. Prophecy is understanding truly what the present is like, and seeing clearly what a new future might be. God gave the people exactly what they needed most, to be able to hope when hope seemed hopeless.

Well, that's what happened to the prophet Joel. Or is it, that's what will happen, according to the prophet Joel? Hard to say. Remember Joel doesn't say when any of this happens, it could be anytime. It could be right now. There's no reference to any particular king or potentate or president. Right now is just as good a guess as 1,000 years ago. That's what the prophet Joel is like, a little loose on the details. The one thing that is clear, though, is the locusts. There have to be locusts.

You know, up until recent years, I didn't really understand what locusts were. I didn't get them, not the way I do now. I thought locusts were something I had never seen, never experienced. Locusts, they are little things, things that one at a time are not overwhelming, but which just keep coming. A plague of locusts, it eats away at hope. Day after day, so that it seems that nothing will work and there is no purpose even in trying. Despair—that is what a locust plague does, it beats a people. Until recent years, I hadn't understood that I am living under a plague of locusts.

The great barrier reef, bleached white and dying—one locust. The great pacific garbage patch spreading microplastics into every living thing in the sea—two locusts now. Violence across the globe, civil wars, the breakdown of government after government—more locusts now. Rashes of gun-violence moving the goalposts of moral horror—more locusts. Hate and white-supremacy marching like proud-boys with new toys—and while scrambling to do something about the locusts and chase them off of what we need to survive—even at the same time the opioid crisis claims another hundred lives, corruption reeks from the highest offices of government and black lives are cut short before the barrel of a gun, and the realization can come crashing like a wave—my God, it just keeps coming, it never stops. Locusts. A terrible plague. The way that it eats away at hope. Day after day, so that it seems that nothing will work and there is no purpose even in trying. Despair—that is what a locust plague does, it beats a people.

Joel could be anytime—as long as there are locusts—which we have. But Joel doesn't end with locusts. The book of Joel says that just at the time when people begin to despair, believing that perhaps they could not muster the resources needed in the face of such a plague. It is just then that God shows up. It is just then that God takes action, though it not by simply making problems go away. No it starts with portents, signs, indications in the world that something remarkable was about to happen, that the world was about to turn upside down. Portents that things are not working the way they used to work. Signs as clear as the creamy-white moon turned scarlet red, signs that things are going to change. Have you seen the portents?

Strange things. Like a young woman sailing across the Atlantic ocean by herself and then addressing a gathering of the world's most powerful leaders? When like the like occurred? Strange things. Like the hew and cry for criminal justice reform being taken up by—district attorneys of all people, the jailers turned to liberators—who has heard of something like that? Mothers turning their fierce eyes against guns the way they once turned against drunk driving, People of color unmasking and decrying white supremacy, demanding that there be equity among the many races that make up our nation. People of color calling out that white people must stop holding all the cards, dealing them out, keeping back all the twos for themselves and then declaring piously at every hand—deuces wild, but may the best man win.

Can you see the portents? Hear the prophets' voices rising, rising from every corner. Prophecy all around—prophecy, that is understanding truly what the present is like, and seeing clearly what a new future might be.

God giving us what we need most, more than anything in the world, to be able to hope when hope seems hopeless.

Prophecy being poured out upon all flesh—young ones and elders, men and women, the free and the oppressed. The spirit of God waiting to be caught up by a new voice, in a new place, in a new town. The prophet Joel could be about any time. Even now. The prophet Joel could be about anyone. Even you.