



First United Church of Oak Park

Places of Extremis and Distress

Joel 2:23-32

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The prophet Joel is one of the minor prophets. It is a minor book of prophecy not because it is minor in importance but because it is brief. Only three chapters from beginning to end, yet it includes every element that goes into the classical tradition of prophetic literature. There is a moral assessment of the people, the prediction of a coming judgment, then a promised future of restoration. Yet, it is strangely lacking in the details that normally abound in prophetic works. To which king was this prophecy delivered? What precise threat were the people facing? The prophet Joel could be anytime, the threat it warns of, anything.

First off we will take a look at what the prophet Joel is criticizing: what is the error of the people that God is trying to correct? Joel says nothing about this. Other prophets are very clear—Hosea calls the people to worship the Lord alone, leaving aside other gods, Joel says nothing like this. Amos calls for the people to reform their unjust society, restructuring the common life to care for the least of these. Joel says nothing like this. The prophet Joel calls for the people to repent, but what exactly should they repent of? The prophet Joel could be anytime, the threat it warns of, anything.

Then the coming judgment: I'm afraid that's no help either. It is in one sense very vivid, a swarm of locusts. The very first verses of the book say, you're going to tell your grandchildren about this, how the cutting locusts have devoured all the crops, and whatever was left over after that, the grubs of the locusts will eat that, and whatever the grubs have left over, the hopping locusts will devour. It's an image of wave after wave of pests that eat up all the crops the people need to survive. This language, the cutting locust, the hopping locust, the grub, it seems these are referring to different life cycles of the locust, different phases of their growth. It's especially horrible because what they are eating in order to grow larger is the food the people need to survive. The disaster is self-reinforcing, the locust swarm growing larger and more ravenous the more of the people's crops that it devours. It is an image of total devastation, and one that the people are powerless to stop. Locust swarms were a common thing in the ancient world; this could be any time.

And then the image shifts. After painstakingly laying out a multi-stage life cycle of the locusts who are eating the crops, they suddenly shift. Now the locusts are like lions, eyes flashing, teeth tearing. Now they are like an army, swords flashing, shields impenetrable. Now they are something else entirely, an army of creatures that can leap high walls, climb in through windows, unstoppable, more like something from a nightmare than a history book. Part human, part lion, part locust. It is clear that this is

no longer intended to describe a literal event, but the very idea of a devastation that is out of their control entirely. This could be any sort of threat. At any time. There is no king mentioned, no social circumstance specific enough to narrow down its writing with any specificity.

And so its threat feels looming even now, a threat that is like a locust swarm, that is one that seems to grow and grow and grow, like a flood that bursts past barricades, like an army that crosses all restraints, like an atmosphere choked with poison, like the end coming unstoppably, like a society that must reform but how exactly to reform is not clear even to a prophet. The prophet Joel could be any time, the threat is warns of, anything.

And after this. Restoration. After the cutting and hopping locust, the creeping grub and the leaping soldiers, after unstoppable devastation. The Holy Spirit will descend upon all, from the highest to the lowest. In those days, God says, I will pour my spirit out on all flesh, your young ones shall see visions, your elders dream dreams. What could be becomes as plain as what is, imagining what is new becomes as easy as remembering what has come before. After the devastation comes a restoration, beyond their wildest dreams, in fact the dreams of what might be that captivate them will themselves come from God.

And this leaves me a question—why the devastation in the first place? Why devastation and then restoration? Why the locusts, why the army, why the nightmare of everything changing, why does this precede the restoration? Why not just skip right to the restoration part? Surely that would be within the powers of the almighty?

I am confronted with this question here in the prophet Joel, but to be clear, I have no answer to that question. Why is the world generation after generation faced with dire threats? It is not a question that has an answer; or rather, it is a question that has too many answers, each of which leaves somehow the truth feeling farther away. I won't try to answer the question, but I will offer an observation. What we see in the prophet Joel, this devastation that precedes restoration, this cycle is repeated over and over throughout the Scriptures. I see it in the story of Noah, with the flood preceding a spread of humanity across the earth again. I see it with Abraham and the son who is bound on the sacrificial altar before the promise is finally sealed. I see it in the exile of the people to Babylon, and then their return. I see it in the story of calvary, the death of the savior that comes before the resurrection. It is everywhere, this death and resurrection.

This is the God we meet in the Bible, a God of death and resurrection, exile and return, devastation and new vision. Why would God choose to be met and found most easily in the very shadow of death, rather than in the sunshine roads of happy autumn? I don't know. But what could be becomes as plain as what is, imagining what is new becomes as easy as remembering what has come before. In the places of greatest extremis and concern, there we see God's action most clearly in the Scripture; that is the God we meet in the Bible.

And so if I am looking to find the living God, who is attested to by prophet, embodied by the Lord Jesus, if I am looking to find that very God in the world today? Where am I to look? To the places of extremis, and concern.

The living God is most easily found in tender care offered to a believer on their death bed, comfort offered in song and prayer and gentle touch. The living God is most easily found among Food Pantry lines, among those who find themselves up against the wall with each month harder than the last. The living God is found among those seeking to reform a whole, great nation, with no armaments beyond a clipboard and a call to passersby to add their voice to those seeking a new way. The living God is found among the young people, who see visions, the elders who dream dreams, in the midst of the longest nights when sleep has fled away and troubles are all around. I don't understand why, but the God we meet in the Bible is a God of death and resurrection. Ours is a God of death and resurrection.

Thanks be to God for that indescribable gift.