

I will restore what the Locusts have eaten - Joel 2

Series: Joel

Date: 10 November 2024, 25th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Joel 2:1-27

Last week we began this series on the prophet Joel. We stepped back into ancient Israel to see a devastating locust plague that swept through the land and destroyed all the crops. Joel calls on all the people, the spiritual and political leaders as well as the people to cry out to God in lament in response to this disaster. Joel saw in this locust plague a sign of the judgement of God. Just like God had sent a plague of locusts in judgement upon Pharaoh and through this and the other plagues had rescued Israel from slavery, this time the locusts are God's judgement upon his own people. That was the day of the Lord, when God showed up to confront evil and rescue his people. Joel sees this locust plague as another day of the Lord. Joel doesn't name what is the reason for God's judgement. He assumes that like him we've been reading the other Old Testament prophets with their warnings for Israel to turn from their idolatry and injustice and turn back to worshipping and obeying God.

This week we come to chapter 2, and it's like we've been here before. The locusts are back! The poems in chapter 2 follow a similar theme and structure to chapter 1, but expand on it. The locust plague this time is in the future, and like chapter 1, it's another day of the Lord. We'll look at 3 parts. The Locusts in verses 1-11. Repentance in verses 12-17. And Restoration in verses 18-27. In this chapter we hear God's invitation for us to respond to him in true repentance, and a word of hope in a world of disaster and loss.

1-11 The locusts

Joel 2 opens with the prophet standing like a watchman on the city walls looking out and seeing the approach of an invading army.

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill.

Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming.

It is close at hand – **2** a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.

Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes,
such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come.

If the plague of locusts Judah had experienced in chapter 1 was a day of the Lord, now another day of the Lord is on the horizon. We get a sense of a dark cloud of locusts spreading across the horizon. But there are also echoes here also of Exodus when God appeared on Mt Sinai

with the trumpet blast and a thick cloud.¹ Joel is also referencing the prophet Amos and also the prophet Zephaniah who wrote: “That day will be a day of wrath - a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness - a day of trumpet and battle cry.”²

And so the army comes, and we see both a terrifying description of them and also the effect they have on the land.

Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes.
 Before them the land is like the garden of Eden,
 behind them, a desert waste – nothing escapes them.
4 They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry.
5 With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops,
 like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle.
6 At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale.
7 They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers.
 They all march in line, not swerving from their course.
8 They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead.
 They plunge through defences without breaking ranks.
9 They rush upon the city; they run along the wall.
 They climb into the houses; like thieves they enter through the windows.

As we read this it's hard to know: Is Joel describing another plague of locusts using military imagery or is he describing an invading army using the picture of locusts? This is one of the big questions of how to interpret this passage. A third option is that both locust and military images are a metaphor for the heavenly host. And this seems to be how Joel lands this first poem. Verse 10.

10 Before them the earth shakes, the heavens tremble,
 the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine.
11 The LORD thunders at the head of his army;
 his forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command.
 The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?

A locust swarm blots out the sun during the day, but locusts don't fly at night. Again Joel is drawing on another prophet, this time Isaiah 13.

9 See, the day of the LORD is coming – a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger –

¹ Exodus 19.16-19

² Zephaniah 2.15, cf. Amos 5.18-20

to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.

10 The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light.

The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.

11 I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins.

All three readings are a possibility - locusts, an invading army, the heavenly host. For my money, I think Joel is using the memory of the locust plague of chapter 1 as a window to speak of a coming day of the Lord, when God will come in judgement upon his people. The locusts and the devastation they brought are a picture of what this coming judgement will be like. In this, Joel is repeating the warnings of other prophets like Isaiah, Amos and Zephaniah that if God's people did not turn from their idolatry and injustice, then the curses of the covenant would come upon them and God would come among them in judgement. That day of the Lord would be great and dreadful, and who could endure it? It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.³

And yet, this is not the only word that God has for his people through the prophet Joel. That brings us to point 2.

12-17 Repentance

The promise of God's judgement is always a warning against sin and an invitation to turn back to God. And so we read in verse 12:

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

13 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.

14 Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing – grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.

It's such a powerful picture here. In ancient Jewish culture one of the ways you showed that you were mourning was through weeping and tearing your clothes. Mourning here could be for the loss of a loved one, but it could also be mourning at your own sin. And so this act of mourning would also be an act of repentance, of turning back to God. Here Joel knows sometimes we can just go through the motions. We can do things just for show, but in reality

³ Hebrews 10:31

we're unaffected. And so Joel says, "Rend your heart and not your garments." The change has to go beneath the surface. True repentance to use the apostle Paul's words, includes "godly sorrow".⁴ This is where you are grieved not at getting caught, and not at facing the consequences of what you've done, but you're grieved over the wrong you've done and the fact that *you* did it, and the damage to others that you have caused. This is the response of the prodigal son to his father, "I've sinned against heaven and against you." It's a sorrow that rends your heart.

And it's a sorrow that throws you upon the mercy of God. If rending your heart is *how* to truly repent, then *why* we repent is because of the character of God. Look again at verse 13.

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.

The reason we repent is because God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. This is a quote from when God revealed himself to Moses in Exodus 34.⁵ We can repent because we worship a God who has promised to forgive, whose character is one of grace and compassion. Moses saw a glimpse of this as he peeped out from behind God's hand as his glory passed by and he proclaimed his name. But in Jesus, we have seen God's grace and compassion in the flesh. On the cross we see his arms of forgiveness stretched wide from the east to the west to embrace all who would rend their hearts and return to him. And where Joel said, "Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave a blessing," in Jesus we know God has promised full and free forgiveness and restoration.

We live in a society that finds the idea that God would judge people difficult to stomach. At the same time we are more keen to call out the "sins" we see around us, domestic violence, sexual assault, discrimination, greed, toxic masculinity the list goes on. Our society is also finding it increasingly difficult to give people space to own up to what they've done wrong, and to change. We've got plenty of judgement but we're short on mercy and forgiveness. But forgiveness is exactly what we need. Forgiveness means who we are and our future need not be defined by our mistakes. Change is possible. God loves us, even when we stuff up and he is waiting for us to return to him, standing there with outstretched arms. The question Joel asks us is, are we prepared, not to point the finger, but to examine our own hearts and see where we fall short of what God calls us to? Will we rend our hearts and return to the Lord for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love?

⁴ 2 Corinthians 7.10

⁵ Exodus 34.6-7

Where the chapter opened with him blowing the trumpet to warn of the coming day of the Lord, now in verses 15-17 he blows the trumpet summoning all the people to repent. The whole community is involved, the elders, the children, mothers, newly weds, spiritual leaders, all cry out to God for mercy.

‘Spare your people, LORD.

Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations.

Why should they say among the peoples, “Where is their God?”

Here the appeal is to God’s own name. It’s the same as Jesus taught us to pray - “Hallowed be your name.” Repentance is seen in the people being concerned for God’s reputation. It’s seen in a recognition that how people see us reflects on how they see God. I’m thankful for the season of lament and repentance that our bishop led the Anglican church of Tasmania in in 2018. We had become an object of scorn in the Tasmanian community because of the sins of the past. For spiritual change, for life and health to come to our churches, we needed to begin with lament and repentance. It’s something we do in a little way each we as we say our prayer of confession. Repentance is a way of life for the Christian because we want to keep short accounts with God. But also because his mercies are new every morning.

18-27 Restoration

In verses 18-27 we see God’s response to the repentance of his people.

18 Then the LORD was jealous for his land and took pity on his people.

19 The LORD replied to them:

‘I am sending you grain, new wine and olive oil, enough to satisfy you fully;
never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations.

If the day of the Lord had been one where the locusts would devour and destroy, now in response to the change of heart of his people, the Lord now comes to reverse the curse and restore what has been destroyed. The day of judgement becomes a day of salvation.

First, the enemy threatening his people is defeated.

20 ‘I will drive the northern horde far from you,
pushing it into a parched and barren land;
its eastern ranks will drown in the Dead Sea
and its western ranks in the Mediterranean Sea.
And its stench will go up; its smell will rise.’

Surely he has done great things!

21 Do not be afraid, land of Judah; be glad and rejoice.

Surely the LORD has done great things!

Second, God ends the drought and brings rain, and so the trees and fields again yield their abundance.

- 22** Do not be afraid, you wild animals,
for the pastures in the wilderness are becoming green.
The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig-tree and the vine yield their riches.
- 23** Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God,
for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful.
He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before.
- 24** The threshing-floors will be filled with grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.
- 25** 'I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten –
the great locust and the young locust,
the other locusts and the locust swarm –
my great army that I sent among you.
- 26** You will have plenty to eat, until you are full,
and you will praise the name of the LORD your God,
who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed.

How might we read this promise of restoration on this side of Jesus? Just as the locusts had been a window into God's judgement, so now this restoration and prosperity is a window into what God has promised for the future when Christ returns. God's provision of rain and abundant harvest is a window and sign of what he will do for the whole of creation. It will be restored and liberated from its bondage to decay. There is a sense that when we walk according to God's commands that we're keeping in step with the heartbeat of creation, and this brings peace and prosperity. But we also know that all is not well with this world. Thorns and thistles grow. Creation groans. Disasters still happen. Sickness and disease still threaten. Not to mention the violence and wickedness people inflict upon each other and the world. We live in between the time of God's promise and its final fulfilment. Yes, in Jesus there is forgiveness and freedom from shame. Yes, as we'll see next week, God has given the gift of his Spirit. We receive many of God's blessings now. We give thanks when in this life restore some of the years that the locusts have eaten. But the New Creation has not yet come. And so part of what it looks like to be a Christian is to trust God's promises and to wait in hope.