

What the Locusts have eaten - Joel 1

Series: Psalms of Praise

Date: 3 November 2024, All Souls Day

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Joel 1, Deuteronomy 28.38-47, Luke 13.1-5

I arrived in Tasmania on the day of the Dunalley fires in January 2013. As the ferry came into phone range I started to get messages from folk at St George's saying things like, "Don't worry. Everything is ok. Just keep the radio on as you drive down. You should be fine." I had no idea what they were talking about. When I started driving from Devonport I turned on the radio and discovered what was going on. Nearing Hobart I started to see fires on the hills and embers falling around me. When I arrived at 11:30pm it was still 35 degrees. I wondered what on earth I had come to! Tassie was meant to be cooler than the mainland!

We live in a highly advanced and wealthy society. Our technology and wealth insulate us from the effects of natural disasters. But they cannot prevent them. The summer of 2019-2020 saw Australia's most devastating bushfires with 24.3 million hectares burned, and months upon months of the sky covered in smoke. That of course was followed by the covid pandemic. We are not as in control as we think. Our lives are precarious. How do we respond as a community, as a church, when we go through such a tragedy? Natural disasters also raise questions of faith for us. Why is this happening to us? Where is God?

Today we're starting a 4 week series on the Old Testament book of Joel. Joel is the record of a prophet and a nation wrestling with what a natural disaster means for them and their faith in God. The disaster for Joel's people is not fire or flood like we experience in Tassie, but something quite foreign to us - a plague of locusts. Over the course of this short book we'll see how God speaks through the prophet Joel such that this disaster becomes a window into what God is doing in the world and the hope that he will bring. We'll tackle chapter 1 today, and we'll look at 4 points

1. Joel, son of Pethuel - 1
2. The Locusts - 2-7
3. The Aftermath - 8-12, 15-18
4. Lament - 8,11, 13-14, 19-20

1. Joel, son of Pethuel.

Have a read with me verse 1. *The word of the LORD that came to Joel son of Pethuel.*

Many of the other prophetic books in the Old Testament give more detail about their author and when they were written. But there is none of that in Joel. We don't know any more about him other than his father's name. And we have to do a bit more digging to work out when the book was written. There are three big clues for this. First is that Israel is not mentioned, only Judah. This suggests that the book was written after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Second, Joel refers to lots of other Old Testament books, including many of the other prophetic books. That means it was written after most of the prophetic books. Third, while Joel refers to God's judgement, unlike the other prophets he never gives the *reason* for God's judgement. It is as though he assumes that we as readers will know the reason, because we've read the other prophets. We'll come to what that reason is in due course. As such it seems most likely that Joel wrote after most of the other prophets, after the restoration from exile in the 5th or 4th century BC. What was the occasion for Joel's writing? That brings us to point 2, the Locusts.

2. The Locusts.

Have a read with me from verse 2.

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?

3 Tell it to your children,
and let your children tell it to their children,
and their children to the next generation.

4 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 have eaten.

This seems impossibly far away from us. It's hard to get a sense of just how devastating this was for ancient Judah which relied completely on farming. To help us, here's a little clip of a locust plague in Madagascar 11 years ago.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTOgUjMcQWk>

Those numbers are staggering. 500 billion locusts eating 100,000 tonnes of vegetation every day. The text captures their devastating impact. Wave upon wave of locusts devouring everything in their path. Joel uses vivid imagery.

A nation has invaded my land, a mighty army without number;
it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness.

7 It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig-trees.
It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away,

leaving their branches white.

Before the locusts there were abundant crops. Now only the white skeletons of trees remain.

Joel calls the people to lament at the devastation the locusts have brought. He begins with perhaps an unlikely segment of society. Verse 5

Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine;
wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips.

One of the ways people often respond to disaster is to drown their sorrows. But no grapes means no wine. A truly devastating day for the alcoholic. Wine is often seen in the Old Testament as a symbol for God's blessing, a gift to be enjoyed in celebration often at the harvest. So here when it is taken away, we begin to see that there may be a theological dimension to this plague of locusts.

The people of Joel's day, and indeed all ancient Jewish readers would remember that locusts were one of the 10 plagues that God sent on Egypt.¹ These plagues were God's judgement upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians for enslaving God's people and refusing to let them go. It was through this judgement that God rescued his people and revealed himself to be the true and living God, in contrast to Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. This was the defining moment of Israel's history, where God brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm and made Israel his people and he their God in the covenant at Mt Sinai. In the book of Deuteronomy we read that God promised to bless his people if they kept the terms of the covenant and obeyed the commands he had given them. But if they disobeyed God and broke the covenant, then curses would come upon them. And so we read in Deuteronomy 28:

You will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little, because locusts will devour it. **39** You will plant vineyards and cultivate them but you will not drink the wine or gather the grapes, because worms will eat them. **40** You will have olive trees throughout your country but you will not use the oil, because the olives will drop off. **41** You will have sons and daughters but you will not keep them, because they will go into captivity. **42** Swarms of locusts will take over all your trees and the crops of your land.

Just as a locust plague had been the instrument of God's judgement upon Egypt, so if Israel was unfaithful to God, he could bring locusts against his own people.

The prophets had warned again and again that Israel and Judah against their worshipping other gods and filling their streets with injustice. They had warned that unless the people

¹ Exodus 10.1-20

turned back to loving God and loving their neighbour then God's judgement would come. And so in the plague of locusts, Joel sees that that day of judgement had come.

3. The Aftermath - 8-12, 15-18

Through the rest of the chapter we see the devastating effect of the locust plague. It seems that the locusts were followed by a drought.

10 The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up;
the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the olive oil fails.

11 Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers;
grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed.

12 The vine is dried up and the fig-tree is withered;
the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree –
all the trees of the field – are dried up.
Surely the people's joy is withered away.

Like we saw on the video - the locust plague has not only affected the people, it has also had an impact on the livestock.

18 How the cattle moan! The herds mill about
because they have no pasture; even the flocks of sheep are suffering.

In verse 15 Joel introduces a theme that will run through the whole book - the day of the Lord.

Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near;
it will come like destruction from the Almighty.

The day of the Lord is one when Yahweh, the God of Israel, will show up, just like he did to rescue the Israelites from slavery under Pharaoh. The terrifying prospect here is that these locusts are God coming in judgement upon his own people for their rebellion and wickedness. How is it that Joel and people might respond to this day of the Lord, this day of destruction and devastation? That brings us to point 4.

4. Lament

Joel calls upon the nation to lament. Listen to his words:

8 Mourn like a virgin in sackcloth grieving for the betrothed of her youth.

That is what this disaster is like - a young woman in love, whose fiance is slain just before their wedding. All her hopes and dreams have been ripped from her. What was meant to be a day of joy and celebration is now one of grief and mourning. All she can do is weep.

9 Grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off from the house of the LORD.

The priests are in mourning, those who minister before the LORD.

With no grain left after the locusts, there is nothing to offer God in sacrifice. There is no worship and so the priests too mourn.

11 Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers;

grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed.

In verse 13 we read:

13 Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn;

wail, you who minister before the altar.

Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God;

for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God.

14 Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly.

Summon the elders and all who live in the land

to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.

Joel calls all the people, led by the priests and elders, to come before God in mourning, to cry out to him in lament.

Lament is something that we've largely forgotten about in our culture and it's something we've forgotten in the church as well. But lament is a major theme of the poetry in the Bible. Lament is a gift from God to us and the primary way we can respond to disaster and suffering. So often when we are confronted with suffering we look away, or reach for easy and trite answers, "It will be all right. It's part of God's plan," and so on. We do that because suffering is not easy. It's hard. It's painful. And we'd rather not think about it. Lament refuses easy answers. It allows us to name exactly what is going on and how we feel. In lament we can bring the full breadth of our sorrow and confusion and anger to God. We can voice our protest at injustice. We can complain about suffering. We can ask God why? But we can also name the guilt and shame that we feel, legitimate or not. In lament we can be searingly honest about what is going on and how we feel, knowing that there is a God who sees and knows and loves us.

There will be time for repentance. That comes in chapter 2. But Joel's immediate response to the disaster of the locusts is lament. He calls all the people to cry out to God in lament. And he himself calls out to God.

19 To you, LORD, I call, for fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness and flames have burned up all the trees of the field.

I like that there is a space in Joel between lament and repentance. It's a space that allows us to be honest about what is going on and how we feel before we move to what we might need to do. Lament allows us simply to cry out to God in our pain. As we've seen Joel assumes his contemporaries and ancient Jewish readers would know the prophetic tradition of warning of God's judgement if they did not turn from their idolatry and wickedness. They could trace a direct line from the locusts to their own sin. But we read this book not as those under the covenant of Moses, but under the new covenant Jesus has purchased with his blood. Because Jesus died for all sin, we can no longer draw a straight line from particular natural disasters to corporate sin. Yes, natural disaster can be a moment for self examination as Jesus says in our reading from Luke 13. But in that text Jesus himself deliberately does *not* say because you did that sin, this disaster has come upon you.

Joel chapter 1 invites our first response to disaster to be one of lament. We can cry out to God in our pain. That may be in personal tragedy. It may in community disaster. It may be in solidarity with the suffering of others. We're called to mourn with those who mourn.²

In his book *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, Mark Vroegop draws on the Psalms to suggest 4 elements to lament.³ There is a turning to God in prayer. Bringing our complaints to God. Asking boldly for him to act. Finally, even in the midst of pain and sorrow and anger, choosing to trust him.

Jesus gives us a promise. "Blessed are those who mourn for the *will* be comforted."⁴ Not might be. Will be. And that is because we have a Father in heaven who hears the cries of his children. It is because we have a brother in Jesus himself, who has entered into the full depth of human misery and shared in our suffering. It is because God gives us his Spirit, the Comforter, who knows us better than we know ourselves. And when we are in such agony we don't know what to say, the Spirit cries with groans that words cannot express and so helps us.⁵ So when the locusts have stripped you bare, hear Joel's invitation and, with God's people through the ages, cry out to the God who hears and comforts his people.

² Romans 12.15

³ Psalm 77, 10, 22 and 13

⁴ Matthew 5.4

⁵ Romans 8.26-27