

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Joel
Joel 2:13-14, 28-32**

In 1874 Laura Ingalls Wilder moved with her family from western Wisconsin near Lake Pepin and settled in southwestern Minnesota, Walnut Grove near Plum Creek. For 7-year-old Laura, it was a story that was filled with sunshine and shadows. Listen as Shirley Bowers reads the words of Laura Ingalls Wilder in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*.

The wheat was almost ready to cut. Every day Pa looked at it. Every night he talked about it. He showed Laura some of the long, strong heads of wheat. Pa said the weather was perfect for ripening wheat. "If this keeps up," he said, "we'll start harvesting next week."

At the dinner table Pa told Ma about it. He had never seen such a crop. There were forty bushels to the acre, and wheat was a dollar a bushel. They were rich now. This was a wonderful country.

Laura sat facing the open door and the sunshine streaming through it. Something seemed to dim the sunshine. "I do believe a storm is coming up," said Ma. "There must be a cloud over the sun."

Pa got up quickly and went to the door. A storm might hurt the wheat. The light was queer. It was not like the changed light before a storm. It was a cloud of something like snowflakes, but they were larger than snowflakes, and thin and glittering. There was no wind, but the cloud came on across the sky faster than wind.

Something hit Laura's head and fell to the ground. She looked down and saw the largest grasshopper she had ever seen. Then huge brown grasshoppers were hitting the ground all around her, hitting her head and her face and her arms. They came thudding down like hail. The cloud was hailing grasshoppers! The cloud was grasshoppers!

Then Laura heard another sound, one big sound made of tiny nips and snips and gnawings. "The wheat!" Pa shouted. He dashed out the back door and ran toward the wheat field.

In time the darkness went away. The sun shone again. All over the ground was a crawling, hopping mass of grasshoppers. They were eating all the soft, short grass off the knoll. The tall prairie grasses swayed and bent and fell. They were eating the willow tops. Whole branches were bare and knobby with masses of grasshoppers.

The green garden rows were wilting down. The potatoes, the carrots, the beets and beans were being eaten away. The long leaves were eaten off the cornstalks, and the tassels and the ears of young corn in their green husks fell, covered with grasshoppers.

In her room, through the walls of the house, Laura could still hear the whirring and snipping and chewing. There were no grasshoppers in bed, but she could not brush the feeling off her arms and cheeks. In the dark she saw grasshoppers' bulging eyes and felt their claws crawling on her skin until finally, she went to sleep.

Day after day the grasshoppers kept on eating. They ate all the wheat and the oats. They ate every green thing—all the garden and all the prairie grass.¹

[End of reading.]

From 1873 until 1877, the grasshoppers plagued southwestern Minnesota and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Four hundred years before the time of Christ in an area of Judah just outside of Jerusalem, there was a plague that was very similar. In the Bible it was called *The Plague of Locusts*. All grasshoppers are not locusts but all locusts are grasshoppers. They are called locusts when they swarm together and devour green things as they did on the plains of southwestern Minnesota. Listen as the prophet Joel recounts the story of the events of his time. The account begins this way.

¹ The word of the LORD that came to Joel son of Pethuel.

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 [Joel 1:1-4].

⁶ 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 [Joel 1:6-8].

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 defenses
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 [Joel 2:4-9].

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.

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
[Joel 1:9-12a].

¹⁸ How the cattle moan!
The herds mill about
because they have no pasture;
even the flocks of sheep are suffering [Joel 1:18].

¹² Surely the people's joy
is withered away [Joel 1:12b].

If this is the Word of the Lord, I doubt that anyone felt like saying, "Thanks be to God." Judah was broken. The grasshoppers had stripped the land. Nothing remained for the people. Nothing remained for the cattle. Nothing remained for the wild animals. Nothing remained for offerings and sacrifices in the temple. The people's joy had withered away and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

The story of this and countless other accounts of swarms of locusts caused me to wonder, was this plague a naturally recurring phenomenon or was this something that was directly from the hand of God? And if the devastation came from the hand of God as punishment, what was it the people had done? The Book of Joel is just three chapters long and gives little clue as to what, if anything, the people had done. Verse 5 has been cited as a clue by some scholars.

⁵Wake 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 [Joel 1:5].

In my Baptist days, it would have been clear to me that these folks must have been Presbyterian or Episcopalian Jews and God was punishing them for their consumption of wine. Some commentators suggest that perhaps this verse alludes to a self-absorption brought on by prosperity and a sense of not needing God, which may, in fact, have been the case or may have been a bit of a stretch. Here is what we do know. We know that the people of Judah were devastated by the infestation of locusts. They felt helpless against this invading army of grasshoppers. When a plague of locusts comes into your world or into mine, what do we do? Where do we turn when helplessness overwhelms?

Many years ago, I was *riding along in my automobile, my baby beside me at the wheel. Crusin' and playin' the radio, to the East Coast I was determined to go.* Sorry to Chuck Berry for that. I was on a road trip from Minnesota to see my family in Connecticut. I was riding in our '62 Volkswagen bug. About 60 or so miles into the trip I heard a thumping sound that seemed to come from the back of the car. So I turned off the radio, pulled onto the shoulder, and got out and looked in the back. After exploring just a bit and finding nothing, I got back into the car and headed east once again. When I no longer heard any thumping sounds, I once again turned on the radio to my favorite station, Classic Rock. About 60 or so miles down the road I again heard a thumping sound. I turned off the radio and pulled the car onto the shoulder. I looked in the back and again found nothing, so I went back onto the highway. With no thumping sounds, I switched on the radio. Sixty miles or so later, it happened again. And it happened again and again. The pattern continued so you know what I did? I turned off the radio.

I don't know if you are like me or what your background is, but when I was growing up, I was taught that rock music was evil and good Christians should not listen to this stuff, so I began to wonder if God was trying to tell me something. Was God sending me a message and perhaps punishing me for my musical choices? So I decided to leave the radio off.

Do you ever think like that? Something bad happens and you begin to wonder, did I do something wrong? Is God trying to get my attention? Is God punishing me? Just so you're not left hanging, when I got to Connecticut and had time to really examine the car with my brother who is a mechanic, we discovered that there was a little spring holding one of the brake shoes that was pretty flimsy. Apparently, driving 60 or so miles at highway speeds set up a vibration

that caused the brake pads to rattle. Whenever I applied the brakes and stopped the car, I reset the brakes so the thumping stopped. It really wasn't a punishment of God after all.

When a tornado hits Moore, Oklahoma, we call it an act of God. We forget that Jesus said,

⁴⁵ He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous [Matthew 5:45].

We want to get away from the words of Jesus which say,

³³ In this world you will have trouble.

But Jesus also says,

But take heart! I have overcome the world" [John 16:33].

Still, when the locust plagues come rolling in, we have a tendency to wonder, what did I do to deserve this? What is God trying to teach me? Is God trying to teach me something in the middle of this? It is really not a bad question to ask. Sometimes a little self-examination is helpful. Sometimes self-examination will lead to repentance, which means turning toward God to follow and attend to God's Word. Sometimes personal reflection helps us to better see and know God.

In the midst of their locust invasion, Joel called upon the people of Judah to turn to 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 1:14].

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 [Joel 2:12-13a].

Again, to return is to repent, to turn toward God.

¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister before the LORD,
weep between the portico and the altar.
Let them say, "Spare your people, LORD.
Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn,
a byword among the nations [Joel 2:17].

Joel knew that **God wants a relationship with us**. If we stray, God invites us back. If we are in trouble, God invites us to move in closer. In the midst of the plague, God is there, waiting with open arms, saying, "Come to Me. Return to Me." 2nd Chronicles 7:14 reminds us

¹⁴ . . . if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

In the Gospels, Jesus simply says it this way.

³⁷ . . . whoever comes to me I will never drive away [John 6:37].

When calamity hits, when grasshoppers are marching relentlessly, we are reminded that God desires a relationship with us and He invites us to draw closer.

From 1873 until 1877 the plague of grasshoppers tormented the people of southwestern Minnesota. The people of Minnesota cried out to the governor, “Do something!” So in response to the people, Governor Pillsbury proclaimed April 26, 1877 a day of fasting and prayer. A late spring snowstorm came and killed off most of the larvae and in 1877, the plague of locusts came to an end. Even in the midst of our distress, God is present, reaching out for us. Even when we don’t understand, like children not understanding what their parents are doing, even when we are not ready or able to respond, God says, “Call to me. Return to me. Come to me with all your heart.” **God invites us, and when we draw closer, we discover the character of God.** We discover a God of compassion and grace. Joel says,

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.

¹⁴ Who knows? He may turn and relent
and leave behind a blessing—
grain offerings and drink offerings
for the LORD your God [Joel 2:13b-14].

When Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive the Law a second time, God appeared to him and these are the words God chose as a self-description.

⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness [Exodus 34:6]

God wants to be in relationship with us. He wants to pour out a blessing upon us. These words are repeated over and over again in the Old Testament. “I am God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in love.” He wants to be in a relationship with us and that is what happened for the people of Judah.

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

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

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

²² . . . for the pastures in the wilderness are becoming green.
The trees are bearing their fruit;
the fig tree and the vine yield their riches [Joel 2:18-22].

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 [Joel 2:26]

God longs for a relationship with us. “Return to me, for I am compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love.” God takes no delight in our tribulations. God weeps with us in our sorrows and offers to walk with us through the turbulent waters of life. How could Horatio Spafford write the words, “It is well with my soul”?

Some of you know the story. He experienced incredible tragedy within the space of less than a year. First, his only son died from Scarlet Fever at age four. Then the Chicago fire of 1871 destroyed all of his properties and holdings in Chicago. Feeling the strain of the loss of his son and all of his businesses, he planned a vacation in England with his wife and four daughters. Because of a last minute business development, he was forced to delay his departure so he sent his wife and four daughters on ahead, planning to join them later. But the ship didn’t make it all the way. It went down and all four daughters were lost at sea. He hastily arranged to take the next available ship to join his grieving wife, who had been saved. As the ship passed over the area where his daughters were lost at sea, he went into his room and penned the words to the hymn, *It Is Well with My Soul*.

When the horrors of life swept over him, Horatio Spafford fell into the arms of the one who was reaching out and inviting, “Come to Me all who are heavily burdened and I will give you My rest.” In the midst of despair, he found a God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. In the arms of Jesus, he could say, “It is well with my soul.”

In the midst of our plagues, the Prophet Joel invites us to draw close to God, a merciful and faithful Father who longs to be our God in our despondency and in our prosperity. As this prophecy draws to a close, Joel looks forward and envisions a brighter future on the horizon.

²⁸ “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.

²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days [Joel 2:28-29].

³² And everyone who calls
on the name of the LORD will be saved [Joel 2:32]

God desires a relationship with us. He does not leave us alone in our misery but comes to us with compassion and mercy and grace to help us in our time of need. God comes with the assurance that everyone who calls on the Name of the LORD will be saved.

As Laura Ingalls Wilder tells her story of the grasshopper plague, she finishes her account in this way.² Listen as Shirley Bowers continues to read for us.

One day in early summer when Pa came in to dinner he said, "The Grasshoppers are hatching. Up through the ground like corn popping."

They grew large and brown and ugly. Thick over all the ground they were hopping, and Laura and Mary stayed in the house.

One day the grasshoppers were making a new sound. All across the dooryard the grasshoppers were walking shoulder to shoulder and end to end, so crowded that the ground seemed to be moving. Not a single one hopped. Not one turned its head. As fast as they could go, they were all walking west.

That whole day long the grasshoppers walked west. And the next and the next. They walked without stopping.

They walked steadily over the house. They walked over the stable. They walked into Plum Creek and drowned, and those behind kept on walking in and drowning until dead grasshoppers choked the creek and filled the water and live grasshoppers walked across on them.

It was near noon on the fourth day when Pa came from the stable shouting, "Look outdoors! Look outdoors! The grasshoppers are flying!"

Everywhere grasshoppers were spreading their wings and rising from the ground. More and more of them filled the air, flying higher and higher, till the sunshine dimmed and darkened and went out as it had done when the grasshoppers came. Only this time, they were rising instead of falling.

The cloud passed over the sun and went on far to the west until it could be seen no longer. There was not a grasshopper left in the air or on the ground, except here and there a crippled one that could not fly.

Ma went into the house and threw herself down in the rocking-chair. "My Lord!" she said. "My Lord!" The words were praying, "Thank you, my Lord! Thank you!"³

[End of reading.]

God had been with them in the plague. God was with them in the deliverance. And God would be with them into a future that suddenly looked so much brighter. So, my friends, whether or not

you are facing your own plague of locusts, the invitation is the same. *Come home. You who are weary, come home.*⁴

Lord God, You are faithful, dependable, reliable. We are sometimes unfaithful, not dependable, not reliable. You are gracious and compassionate and don't keep a record of our sins and sometimes we are not any of those things but still You remain. And You invite us to come wherever we are, to come in close to find Your deliverance, to find Your presence to help us. And so, Lord Jesus, we draw to You. We who are weary are coming home. Amen.

¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, first published in 1937, Harper Collins, NY, excerpted from chapter 25, *The Glittering Cloud*.

² The work of Laura Ingalls Wilder is historical fiction. Wilder created this ending to the account of grasshoppers. In reality, her family left Walnut Grove after two years because of failed crops caused by the infestation of grasshoppers.

³ Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, excerpted from chapter 32, *Grasshoppers Walking*.

⁴ From *Softly and Tenderly*, a Christian hymn composed and written by Will L. Thompson in 1880.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.