

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
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The Wonder of His Power | Joel 2**

So, this is the second week of Advent, the season that's supposed to get us ready for Christmas. Last week Carrie Gleeson started with the story of the prophet Daniel, and she reminded us that the season of Advent is about learning to wait for God to step in. Learning to wait for God to save and then using the story of Daniel to show that waiting is not passive. We need to learn how to live in a way that shows we are trusting that God will show up as we wait. The second week, when we combine waiting again with bad news, we learn again. I don't even have to guess—I know that every person in this room either has experienced bad news this month or is sitting near someone that has, and when we continue waiting with bad news, what happens is we develop something called longing. Advent is a season of recognizing our longing. What do we long for? I want a different future, what do I long for? That's why the prophets are so good.

The prophet we're talking about today is Joel. The Bible never tells us exactly when Joel wrote. Probably Joel lived about twenty years after Daniel. Remember from last week—Daniel and the lion's den? His three friends in exile with him: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and the furnace? Then the Persians—about twenty years after Daniel—let some of the Jews return to Jerusalem. They rebuild the temple and they build a wall around Jerusalem, and they start to live semi-independent lives again. That's probably when Joel speaks, but even though we don't know exactly, the truth is that Joel's message has a timeless quality to it. It could apply to any part of the biblical story or to your story. Now, I'm not going to embarrass you by asking how many of you have read through the story of Joel, or who could even find the book of Joel, because I couldn't. Before I went to seminary it was just a word, but I had an Old Testament survey professor who insisted that we read through the whole testament during his class. That seemed to make sense, but then he also said, "I want you to memorize one verse from every book of the Old Testament...a theme verse." One verse beginning with Genesis all the way to Malachi—thirty-nine books, so thirty-nine verses. When we got to the book of Joel he said, "Who can tell me what the theme verse of Joel is?" Half the class raised their hands, and I pretended that I lost my pencil because I was a fairly new Christian and I didn't know. He says, "That's right. There's one famous verse in Joel and we're not going to memorize that." He said, "There's one famous image and what I want to teach you is that the prophets are used by God to grab people's heart through images and through visions." So, let's look at Joel.

<sup>1</sup> The word of the Lord that came to Joel the son of Pethuel. <sup>2</sup> Listen all of you, young and old alike, everybody who lives in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or the days of your ancestors? <sup>3</sup> Tell about this to your kids, let your children tell it to their children, their children to the next generation. [Joel 1:1-3]

This is big news that will last a long time. What's the problem with news that lasts a long time? It stops being news; it starts being history. That's what we're in danger of doing with the Bible. Taking the news, turning it into history and asking, "Will this be on the test?" Reading over and over, "Yeah I know it's important, this history we're reading, but 1492, is that the Mayflower or Columbus?" The role of the prophet is to keep it alive, keep our hearts engaged. So in Chapter 2, Joel says:

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> A day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. [Joel 2:1-2]

He's trying to raise the temperature on this message that goes for a long time. I got a picture of that, what that must have sounded like, when about thirty of us went to Israel this last March. Part of our trip to Israel was that we took a bus ride down to the Gaza strip, and just outside of Gaza is a series of small towns that have grown up around it. We went to the police station of one of these small Jewish towns because we wanted to visit something that would show us what they worry about the most. This picture is what they worry about the most [picture shown]. It's a scrap heap, right? Actually, those are homemade missiles. They collect homemade rockets and missiles that are fired off from inside the territory of Gaza. These people feel like they are in a prison camp of two million people, and the only way they can get attention is to fire off rockets, homemade rockets. They fire them off, they don't know where they are going to land, and they collect them here, as a reminder of the danger. They do more than that when they see what it looks like, and this second picture is what it looks like. That's a rocket going out of Gaza. When they see that, they respond—the Jews do. Two ways: when the heat bloom comes up on the radar, they hit a button and all over Israel, alarms sound. It's called the Iron Dome. The alarm sounds and within a twenty-five mile radius of Gaza, the sirens go off, and children are taught they have forty seconds to get into a shelter. Shelters are in the police station, the fire station, the schools. They run for the bus stations, and there's an underground spot where they can hide. They don't have to do as many drills as we do in school because it happens for real.

That's what the prophet Joel is doing. He's saying, "Hey, wake up! It's coming!" What's the warning about? Well, the warning is the verse that my professor had us memorize. It's Joel 1:4.

<sup>4</sup> What the cutting locust has left the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locusts has left the hopping locust has eaten; and what the hopping locusts has left the destroying locust has eaten. [Joel 1:4]

I was so confused. I had no idea what was going on, and the professor explained that this is a metaphor for what happens literally in this part of the world. You want to see a swarm of locusts? It looks like this (slide shown), but when you get closer to the swarm of locusts, it looks like this (slide shown). There are all different kinds of locusts, and between them they lay waste to everything in front of them. The scariest part is that

people are living right in the middle of it when it happens. He says the locusts are central to Joel because it's a series of disasters that leave everyone in its path battered and broken. Originally, it was probably used as a metaphor to describe the invading armies from the North...the Assyrians and the Babylonians who devastate the land. But what Joel wants to make sure people hear, and what my professor said I needed to preach, was that the locusts are still alive. The locusts are still here today, and we are in many ways battered and afraid of them.

The best book I've read in the last three or four years about poverty and its relief is by Gary Haugen and it's called *The Locust Effect*. Gary, the head of International Justice Mission says, "You can build all the wells you want, and you can teach people how to rotate crops, you can set up small industries that people will get out of poverty with, and it does not make a difference if, before you leave, you require the end of violence, because if you leave, the bullies are attracted to the new wheat. The bullies are attracted to the new money, the bullies are attracted to clean water, and they come like locusts, and they leave nothing but destruction in its way." That's an extreme example, but it's personal isn't it?

We are in a societal time right now here in the states, and especially abroad, where people feel weird, they feel off-balance; they feel like things could go wrong. They hear the gnawing of the locusts, but it also gets personal. I had sort of a rough week last week and being a pastor, I did what pastors do . . . I whined about it. I sent a note to three or four of my friends and said, "It's been sort of a tough week. Would you pray for me?" and the thing that struck me is within twenty-four hours I got four responses from them. One of them said, "You, too?" One of them said, "I remember what that felt like." The third one said, "Tell me about it. I work for the Vikings." My friends were great because they said they would pray for me. We hear the locusts gnawing, too.

My friend, Bruce Locklear, who's the principal at Edina High School, would tell you that the locusts are at high schools and you'd believe that if you saw the number of kids on anti-depressants. The locusts are in our houses and you'd believe that if you saw the level of anti-anxiety medicines. The strain of our society . . . it's the human condition and it doesn't matter if you are in the Congo or in Bloomington, it's the human condition.

Locusts aren't about us being bad or us doing bad alone. It is about us living in a broken world. So, when the prophet Joel says you need to repent, he's not saying you did something wrong. He's saying you need to change the direction of your heart. You need to put your trust in God again instead of wondering if you're going to get the new job again. You need to put your trust in God in a fresh way instead of worrying about whether your kid will come back or not. The locusts are here.

Advent is a time where the brokenhearted wait for God to save. There's an Old Testament professor named Walter Brueggemann and he said, "We cannot truly open our hearts to wait on God to act until we acknowledge just how bad it is. Until we enter into the pain of being human and realize that in the end, nothing we do protects us from this pain, then we're mostly just on our own doing it ourselves, trying our best, even

proud of being religious people.” And he uses this great line and I love this line: “The work of grief is the precondition of joy.” You cannot experience real joy until you admit your grief, because when you grieve or you grieve together, you make room in your hearts and lives for the kingdom of God to emerge in amazing ways. So, Joel says *repent, come home, trust God again*. Verse 12 . . .

<sup>12</sup> “Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart”, rip apart your heart and not your clothes. Return to the Lord for He is gracious. [Joel 2:12]

Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing. And for Joel, the thing is, the Jews did repent and God did relent, and they were brought back into the safety of Jerusalem. It says the Lord was jealous for His land and took pity. He replenished the fields, drove the enemies away, broke the drought and the fire with rain, and the people came home. Joel is broken into two parts: there’s the part that says the terrible locust plague is coming as a judgement from God and people repented and God restored them, and then the second half of the book is them sitting in the temple, the freshly rebuilt temple, saying, *so, what happens next?* and looking out and seeing the locusts and Joel saying, *it’s not over, yet!* He points to how God, at some future time, will act differently. This is the famous verse in the book of Joel.

<sup>27</sup> Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed. <sup>28</sup> And afterward, (not now Joel says, but afterward) I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesize and your old will dream dreams, your young will see visions. <sup>29</sup> Even the servants, even the men and women servants, <sup>29</sup> I’ll pour out my Spirit and show wonders. [Joel 2:27]

The whole story of the Old Testament is about God’s plan to redeem creation, to make it right. And here is Joel—standing in the temple in Jerusalem. He’s a Jew, and the Jews looked back and saw how God restored the temple and how so much was good. But they also looked out and saw the locusts and the devastation and the injustice that continued, and Joel longed for the day when the Messiah would come and give people His Spirit.

This is the second Sunday of Advent. We stand in the middle. We wait in the middle. We look at everything God has done. We stand here as followers of the Messiah that Joel is talking about . . . Jesus. He reconciled us through His death and resurrection, and gave us life and that’s great, yet just like Joel, we look out the window and beneath the pretty snow we hear the locusts and we see the injustice of a broken world that God longs for us not to turn our backs on. This Advent we want to see what happens next and we wait to see what happens next, especially for people whose hearts are anxious. Is that you? Is that somebody you know? Especially for people whose hearts are broken, Joel speaks for you.

Parker Palmer is a Christian writer. He’s got this great quote. He says, “You know a broken heart isn’t necessarily a bad thing. You think of it as something broken apart and

shattered, and it's like glass, but it could also be something broken open, like a crack in a seed that's about to sprout." Opening our hearts to pain increases our capacity for hope so that through the cracks, God's newness can emerge. That's what we long for; that's what our hearts long for at Christmas—that God's love would emerge through the cracks, where the presence of God's justice and God's redemption would roll over the creation. Where the baby boy king would have the breath of the fear of the Lord and His breath would put His spirit on all of us, so that we wouldn't have to be afraid anymore. Would you pray?

Lord Jesus, we're going to end here at the table. The table that You gave us when You became an adult and You promised us food that the locusts could never destroy. That You would take Your body and stretch it out on the cross and offer us the bread of life. That You would slit open our veins and Your blood would wash us clean and forgive us. That the locusts would never be able to take away what You give to us here. Bless us in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit, with your food. Amen.

*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.*