

“And Afterward...”

Reading: Joel 2:1-14, 25-32

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Next Sunday is the church’s celebration of Pentecost, our remembrance of the day nearly two thousand years ago when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the first group of Christians and the church was born. It’s more than just a celebration of our birthday, it’s a day that celebrates the beginning of a new age in world history when God began to be present among His people in a new way. We’ve told the story many times before and we’ll tell it again next week, but roughly seven weeks after Jesus was raised from the dead on that first Easter, His followers were gathered in prayer waiting, as He had commanded them, for something – or more accurately, *someone* – else. And suddenly the room where they were meeting was shaken and filled with the sound of a violent wind, and something like tongues of fire appeared on each of them, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit of God. And one of the things that happened was that they began to speak in tongues – they proclaimed the good news about Jesus in all kinds of languages.

And when the people in the street outside start to laugh at them because they think they’re drunk, the Apostle Peter who has been something of a leader among them for a long time stands up and makes sense out of what’s going on by quoting from the book of Joel. None of them saw this coming; though Jesus had tried to explain it to them they didn’t understand what was about to happen. But when the moment came, Peter made sense of it by pointing them to this centuries-old promise by a prophet whose story and context are mostly forgotten. So for us today, as we once again prepare to celebrate the Spirit of God’s presence in the church, let’s look closely at what this prophet had to say. What was it that caught Peter’s attention? What was the story and the meaning behind this passage? When the prophet Joel was writing down these words so long ago, what did he see leading up to the outpouring of the Spirit?

The book of Joel is one of the books of the Minor Prophets, which is a block of twelve books in our Bibles that are minor only because they’re shorter than the Major Prophets, not because they’re minor in meaning. In fact they’re packed with sermons and images and stories and prophecies that shaped the thought of Jesus and the New Testament writers, and so if you take the time to read some of the Minor Prophets you’re bound to stumble across a verse or two here and there that you might recognize as being quoted in the New Testament. What’s unfortunate is that preachers and Christians are more likely to study the major leaguers like Isaiah or Jeremiah, so this chunk of Scriptures often remains neglected and unfamiliar to us. And that’s a shame, because this Minor Prophet is the voice Peter used to show how the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost has always been a part of God’s plan.

Joel’s story begins with a plague of locusts. “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? 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.” It’s something we don’t deal with in this part of the world, but a plague of locusts can still be a problem in some parts of Africa and the Middle East today. There’s a certain species of grasshopper that is mostly harmless most of the time, but when the conditions are right they can begin to swarm in huge numbers, and they can move across the land like an invading army, stripping the land of anything green. That would be a problem

even today; in ancient times it was an utter catastrophe. Joel's story begins with such a plague of locusts.

We could replace the locusts with just about anything else we might call an "act of God." An earthquake, a flood, a tornado, a sudden death or a surprise diagnosis – anything that leaves us in shock, asking God, "Why me?" In fact, scholars have sometimes wondered whether Joel was writing about a literal swarm of locusts or whether he was just using the image of one; we don't have a specific date or event to tie Joel's story to. The point is that it seems as though God's judgment is being poured out on people. It seems as though God is angry with them or the world has gone haywire or the elements have turned against them, and the only thing left to do, apparently, is to give in to despair. In their time of need they turn to God, which is always the right response: "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." And then, "To you, Lord, I call."

And then the Lord, speaking through Joel, raises the stakes. "Let all who live in the land tremble," he says, "for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand – a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness." The "day of the Lord" was prophetic shorthand for a day in the future when God would do great and terrible things, when He would bring mighty judgment and establish peace. But while the day of the Lord would be a good thing, it would also be a terrifying thing, because judgment is good if you've been wronged but it's a scary thing if you're *in* the wrong. Joel shows us that the troubles of our lives are in some way connected to God's final judgment. Just like the blessings and miracles in our lives are giving us a glimpse of the goodness of God's coming kingdom, the trials and tribulations of our lives are also reminding us of the need for repentance and our utter dependence on God. The catastrophes of life, the locust plagues, are not always punishments for the things we've done wrong, but they can still remind us of our mortality and our need to turn our lives over to God in both bad times and good. The swarm of locusts are to be a foreshadowing to Joel's audience of the coming day of the Lord, and they should therefore repent.

And that's exactly what the Lord calls His people to do in Joel's prophecy. It's a passage we often read on Ash Wednesday, when we begin a season of repentance to prepare our souls to remember Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection: "'Even now,'" declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' 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." The crisis comes so that we can be reminded of our need for God and turn to Him. And God assures His people that He is still there with them in spite of the crisis, and He will still take care of them even when it seems like the world is falling apart: "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten."

But God knows this is not really enough to overcome the evil of the world. When you survive a crisis, the crisis leaves you changed. When you lose something it leaves behind a hole. When you are wounded by evil it leaves a scar. So God knows that we think we just need to have back what was taken from us, but that's not actually what we need. We don't just need repayment, we need healing, and so God's promises through Joel do not end with God simply giving them back what the locusts ate. We don't just need to be given back the status quo, we need to be given a future. So God promises to restore them from the locusts, but then there's an "afterward." "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. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”

I don't know about you, but I sometimes have trouble thinking about the “afterwards” in life. I get focused on the next goal or the next step or the next transition in life and I have a hard time imagining things afterward. I think back to before we got married or had a child or any of my life's other major transitions: I was so focused on getting to that point of transition that I couldn't see beyond it, and the life beyond it was going to be so different anyway that I couldn't imagine it. I couldn't imagine married life as a single person; I couldn't imagine life in the real world while I was a student, and yet I was eager to get to those moments. But God gives us an “afterward.” Yes, in the moment of crisis you're focused on getting out of trouble, but there's an afterward. God has more life waiting for you than you've yet imagined. God's justice goes far beyond mere restitution; God's justice will not be satisfied until the entire world is made right by His presence.

So, Joel tells his audience, don't worry about the plague of locusts and don't bother to add up how much they ate, because it will all be restored. What matters more is that the crisis is an invitation to get your heart right with God, because God is coming. There's an “afterward,” and in that “afterward” God is going to be present in a mighty way. The Holy Spirit, Joel promises, will be indiscriminately poured out among God's people in a manner they had never before seen. That's what Peter and the other disciples were seeing on that day of Pentecost.

But the promise of “afterward” does not in any way minimize the reality or the pain of the crisis. Sometimes God's people have a tendency to over-spiritualize things. Sometimes when someone is in pain we tell them, with the best of intentions, in essence that they should ignore their present circumstances because the glories of heaven will be so much better. In other words, you shouldn't grieve your loss now because it will all be better someday, which can sound like pious pie in the sky to someone who's legitimately hurting. But that's not what Joel is saying to us, not at all. There is no afterward without a before. There is no fulfillment without a foreshadowing. There is no repentance and redemption unless we first feel the sting of life in desperate need of God. There is, in other words, no resurrection without there first being a crucifixion, no Pentecost or Easter without Good Friday. And so it is in our lives: no new life unless the old one dies first. God takes seriously the suffering we face, because He knows that it is out of suffering that He refines us and gives us hope. It is out of suffering that He saves us.

Mark Yaconelli writes, “If I were to name the suffering that exists in the West, it is ungrieved grief. It is an unwillingness to admit, to name, to embrace the pain of loss. Many of the destructive practices of the Western world can be traced to a desire to distract ourselves from grief, what we're missing, what we've lost. Distracted from the reality of suffering, my heart hardens and I lose my capacity for compassion, I become less alive.” However, “Baptized by suffering, our eyes can be opened, our heart opened, our soul awakened from its slumber.”

What does all of this mean for us as we sit on the edge of Pentecost? It means that the church is defined by the presence of the Holy Spirit among us, and the presence of the Spirit is in no way disconnected from the stark realities of human life. The church is not ultimately a refuge from real life, it is life at its most real where we bring our hurts and our crises and our failures and our losses and we learn how to see them from the larger perspective of what God is doing in our world. We

don't deny the reality of suffering or hide from it or pretend everything is okay when it's not. We bring our locust plagues together in the presence of the Spirit and we see the desolation of life for what it is: it is a chance to rely on the goodness of God, a reminder of my need for repentance, an opportunity to expect God's great things, and a foreshadowing of the pain of the world that God will one day fully deliver us from.

We now live in the afterward. The Spirit was poured out on the church many centuries ago, and we live in waiting for the rest of what God has promised. We have the deposit of the Spirit, so we know the rest is coming. We can therefore preach to the world with assurance that Jesus is alive, that there will be true and lasting justice one day, and God will make all things right. We can tell our neighbors that their locust plagues are not without meaning or without hope, because there is an afterward for them.



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