

## “Live Meat”

Reading: John 3:1-21; Joel 2:23-32

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

There was an episode of *Doctor Who* in which one of the characters made the sarcastic comment that “life is just nature’s way of keeping meat fresh.” That’s not too far from how some of us live. This whole game we play of getting up in the morning and filling our days with work or play or leisure or whatever else we can think of to keep us going for a little while longer, this endless rat race we run, this wandering journey through the vastness of space, can all be reduced to nothing more than nature’s way of keeping meat fresh. You and I, our achievements and loves and fears and dreams, are all just meat running around with delusions of grandeur. Don’t get too uppity, in other words. You don’t have any special place in the world, and there’s nothing special about humans in the grand scheme of things. Just meat being kept fresh for a little while.

We don’t often hear it put in quite those terms, but how often does our world tell us that we’re just animals, there’s nothing special about humans, and there’s no meaning or purpose beyond what we make for ourselves? There may be great beauty in the universe and we may have achieved great things, but that greatness is entirely subjective: we think we’re pretty great, but no one else does. And at the same time, while our world is telling us that we’re just particularly clever meat, it also insists on things like universal human rights, and it insists that we accept its terms of morality. But it doesn’t really work that way; you can’t be just a highly evolved machine and have intrinsic rights. Either you’re just matter or you’re something more.

Many people don’t bother to get so philosophical about it: we live our lives as though we’re just meat, and we justify our bad choices by saying it doesn’t really matter if I’m not hurting anyone else. There’s nothing beyond what I am now, and there’s no meaning or morality beyond what I create for myself, so I can do as I please and no one can judge me. I’m just keeping meat fresh. But at the same time, don’t you dare question my rights as a person, and don’t you dare try to take what I’ve got coming to me. That wouldn’t be *right*.

The point is that we have a crisis in our world of knowing *what* we are, to say nothing of *who* we are. Is a human nothing more than slightly more attractive and intelligent packaging for meat than, say, if that meat were a cow or a dog? Obviously the claim we make as Christians is that there is much more to being human. The reason our bad choices matter in the grand scheme of things is because they make us less human. When we abuse ourselves or others, or when we use our bodies in ways that do not honor them, we are dehumanizing ourselves and others. That’s why we take sin so seriously: not just because it disobeys God, but because it is less than the good we were made to enjoy. It sells ourselves short and it sells our creator short. We’re *not* just meat being kept fresh by a fluke of nature.

So what are we? Throughout much of this summer we’ve been listening to the cries of the prophets from the Old Testament, and today we hear from the prophet Joel. Joel’s writings are a bit difficult because we don’t know when he lived; there aren’t many details in the book that we can tie to dateable historical events. But there are a couple of passages that have been especially important for God’s people through the ages, and we read one of them today. “And afterward,” the Lord says through Joel, “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.” It’s a verse we often read on or around Pentecost, the holiday that celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church. That first Pentecost after Jesus was raised from the dead saw the first fulfillment of Joel’s promise.

But one of the things that’s interesting about this passage is that in Hebrew, the word we translate as “all people” could literally be translated as “all flesh,” or maybe, if we push it a bit, even “all *meat*.” God will pour out His Spirit on “all flesh.” It’s kind of an idiom in Old Testament Hebrew to refer to humanity as being “flesh.” It emphasizes our createdness: we are distinct from God because we are created beings. God is Spirit, and we are flesh, matter, mortals, like the rest of creation. We are not, as some people picture it, ghosts in machines: we are not souls inhabiting bodies, as though the soul is the “real” me and the body is just a shell that I inhabit for now, and someday I’ll finally escape this shell and be free as I’m meant to be. No, humans are flesh, matter, meat, and you can’t take away the meat and still have a whole person.

And we can point to a variety of places in the New Testament that remind us of that distinction between flesh and Spirit. Didn’t Jesus Himself say, “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” while his disciples were praying in the Garden of Gethsemane? And when the Apostle Paul talks about the flesh and the Spirit, doesn’t he often talk about how “the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit,” and “the mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.” He instructs Christians not to live according to the flesh or they’ll die, so they need to live according to the Spirit instead. Does that mean that spirit is good and flesh is bad, that we ought to try to ignore or escape or deny the flesh, that spirit and flesh are opposed to one another? Not exactly. Again, it goes back to that question of what we are as humans.

So when Joel says that God will pour out His Spirit on all flesh, that ought to catch our attention. We can’t shake that idea that flesh and Spirit are opposites. Like oil and water, Spirit and flesh don’t typically mix. And usually, at least if we’re reading in the Old Testament, it’s pretty rare and limited when God pours out His Spirit on someone. The Spirit might fill a person for a short time or for a particular task, like defeating an enemy or preaching a special message to the people, but it was relatively rare and certainly didn’t happen to “all flesh.”

Let’s take a step back and hear more of Joel’s words to help us understand what God is telling us. At the beginning of our passage, we read, “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.” We don’t know much about the historical setting of Joel’s book, but we do know that the land had recently been devastated by a swarm of locusts. We don’t really know what locusts are in our culture; we don’t have them in this part of the world. For us, they’re just something we read about in the Bible. But they can still be a problem in Africa and the Middle East. Locusts are a certain species of grasshopper that under normal circumstances looks pretty much like any grasshopper you would see in your backyard. Under certain circumstances, though, they change and gather and swarm in enormous traveling groups. They can cover everything for miles and strip the land of vegetation, which is obviously a problem for an agricultural society. A plague of locusts had apparently come through the land, and Joel was announcing to the people that it was a judgment from God because of the sins of the people. “Rend your heart and not your garments,” Joel tells them; what they need to learn from this plague is that they need genuine repentance.

In our passage for today, God is now promising the people that though He has sent these locusts upon them as though it were God's own invading and avenging army, God is not done with them. There is hope for restoration even when the land has been stripped bare. "You will have plenty to eat, until you are full," and when they see that God provides for them even in a time like this, they will have no doubt that He is God "and that there is no other." It's the fulfillment of the prophetic promise that proves God is faithful.

So the immediate cause of Joel preaching to the people is in response to this environmental disaster of a plague of locusts, but after he has assured the people of God's faithfulness through that time, Joel keeps going. He points them to this time further in the future when God's Spirit would be poured out indiscriminately. There doesn't seem to be an obvious connection to the locusts. We go from having enough to eat to the Spirit being poured out and people of all ages prophesying. It seems like we jumped a track. But the point is that we are not just meat. The goal is to take our focus off of our daily needs and on to something greater. The point of our lives is not just to keep meat fresh for one more day, to get enough food for one more day, to keep running the rat race for one more day. It's important for us to have our daily bread, and God does care about that, but what we really need is more than just food.

Joel is promising God's people the missing piece in their lives. The prophet Jeremiah promised that God would give His people a new spirit, that He would remove their old rebellious spirits and give them His own Spirit instead. The prophet Ezekiel promised that God would remove our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh, living hearts. Different imagery, but the same idea: there's something wrong at the core of us, and it takes a special work of God in us to make it right. Joel is promising the fulfillment, that more than just dispensing food for His people, He would pour out His own presence for them. What we need is not just food for our bellies; what we need is for our almost-dead meat to be filled with new life. That can only really come when our mortal flesh is filled with the living Spirit of God.

So why are we reading this passage now, not on Pentecost? Because ever since Pentecost, it's relevant *every* day, not just on a once-a-year holiday. Picture yourself hearing Joel's sermons when he first preached them: you're standing in the desolation of what's left after a plague of locusts. There's nothing green to be seen anywhere. Everything has been eaten. There's no Red Cross or UN coming to give you aid. Your children are hungry, and you have no idea if there's any way to keep them from starving. And Joel promises that God is going to provide for you, and then he keeps on going and says that there's more: His Spirit is coming someday, too, and He's coming for all flesh regardless of age or gender or anything else you might think would qualify you. And you begin to wonder: in a time like this, can there possibly be something beyond the daily fear of death? Can there possibly be hope beyond making sure we have enough to eat? Can it really be possible to be so full of life, so confident in the eternal reign of God, that daily needs recede in importance? Can it really happen that God could so fill us with His own presence that we would stop worrying?

Those were relevant questions in ancient Israel after those locusts came, and they're relevant questions today as well. We have people telling us from all sides that terrible things could happen in just a few days if their candidate doesn't get elected. And it's true, terrible things can happen. But the world won't end until God is ready for it to. One day there will be "blood and fire and billows of

smoke,” and “the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood,” but it will be because God is fulfilling His promises and coming to claim His people, not because of our president. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” And what’s interesting is that the blood and fire and smoke and so on is connected in Joel’s words to the coming of the Spirit: in other words, we don’t have to worry about the end of the world coming because we’re already living in the end days. There are more end days than we expected, but the truth is that God is already in the process of fulfilling His promises and coming to reign over us.

So what does this look like? What does it mean that the Spirit has come? Jesus describes it in terms of new birth. It’s such a different sort of life that you might as well be starting all over again. What’s fascinating is that in the passage we read from John 3, Jesus has to describe the work of God to an expert in God’s law, someone who might literally be able to quote God’s law backwards and forwards. Nicodemus knew all about God, and he had a hunger in his soul to meet God, but even he was still surprised by what Jesus was saying. There is that moment available to each person, to all who will come, to “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord,” to have the Spirit of God come and take up residence within you and give you new life like never before.

But even beyond that, even for those of us who are Christians and had that experience many years ago, there is still the opportunity for a fresh filling of the Spirit. Some Christians are practically dead meat already; they’ve already started dying long before their time, and they’re just barely keeping the meat fresh. But it doesn’t have to be like that. Jesus Christ makes His Spirit available to all who will come to Him, young or old, male or female, rich or poor. If we are consistent and faithful in seeking Him, He will come. He may come with the drama and power of a tsunami – with dreams and prophecies and startling gifts – or He may come quietly and slowly, like the tide coming in. And as He comes, we will see Him cultivate within us gifts as the sign of His presence: gifts that show He is in us, gifts for the encouragement of others, gifts for contributing to the work of God in the world. And more than that, He will grow fruit within us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.

We are living in the age when Joel’s promise has been fulfilled in the church. Are you seeking the presence of God’s Spirit in your life?



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