

February 17, 2021 – Joel 2:12-19 (Ash Wednesday)

In December of 2019, the grasshoppers of Kenya began to transform. Their bodies changed color, from bright green to dark brown. Their wings grew larger, enabling them to take flight, instead of just hopping on the ground. Most of all, their behavior was radically altered. Grasshoppers that were previously isolated and even territorial suddenly began to gather in large, coordinated groups, mating and swarming in thick clouds. Soon, these were no ordinary grasshoppers. They were locusts.

All of this was, ironically, brought about by unusually good weather. After several years of drought, Kenya was receiving adequate rainfall once again. The locusts sensed this and transformed in response. Changing from a creature suited for survival into a creature suited for consumption and reproduction.

It was the worst locust swarm for Kenya in over 70 years. 80 million insects descending like a cloud over an area of 1000 sq mi. Consuming enough food for 35,000 people every day. And Kenya wasn't alone. During 2020, more swarms popped up all over east Africa, the Middle East, and India. And while those initial swarms have now died out, their offspring are just being born, and there are set to be even more swarms this year as well.

When we hear about a “plague of locusts” we tend to think about such things as a relic of the distant past. A concern of the ancient world that doesn't effect us today. But we forget that the United States was still dealing with locust swarms as little as 90 years ago. And that today over 10% of the world's population lives in an area that sees regular locust swarms. It's a very current problem for them.

Thus, the words of the prophet Joel shouldn't be all that foreign to us. You see, the book of Joel begins by talking about a locust swarm. A locust swarm that has already happened... or will happen... or is maybe just a metaphor. It's not entirely clear. Mostly because it's not terribly important. For us, it's basically a parable. And it goes something like this.

Imagine a locust swarm is coming. And like any locust swarm in the ancient world, there's nothing you can do to stop it. One day, you will have plentiful crops and wine and food and money and everything will be good. And the next day, a cloud of insects so thick that it blots out the sun will descend upon your land. And every single good, green thing will be stripped bare by this devouring monster.

Imagine that you know that this swarm of locusts isn't naturally occurring. It's coming as a punishment from God. Punishment for your sins. Punishment for your idolatry. Punishment for how you have treated your neighbor. Punishment for neglecting God's Word. These aren't just any locusts. They are the wrath of God.

Which means that the only thing you can do is pray. Pray that God would take them away. Pray that God would be forgiving. Pray that God would be merciful. All you can do is turn to the Lord in faith and contrition and wait to see what he will do.

So, with all that in mind, would you do it? Would you pray? If we were 24 hours away from the worst agricultural disaster the state of Missouri has ever seen. And the only way to stop it was to confess your sins and ask for God's mercy, would you do it?

I certainly hope so! I would venture to say, if that were the case, I would have the church open and it would be packed to capacity with every single member who could get out of their home, pandemic or not. And I would be leading all of you in heartfelt confession until the very moment the locusts showed up. Just in the hope that this disaster might be averted.

Joel agrees. He knows that's exactly what the people of Israel would do as well. So he asks them, “If you'll return to the Lord to avoid a plague of locusts, why won't you return to the Lord to avoid His eternal wrath and judgment?”

It's a good question. One that is appropriate to ask during Lent in general. And one that is particularly appropriate for Ash Wednesday. From dust you were created. To dust you will return.

There's no question mark on that. It will happen. You are a mortal creature. You will die. The plague of locusts is coming for you. It might be tomorrow. It might be 10 years from now. It might be 50 years from now. But the locusts are coming. And where you are sitting, they will leave behind nothing but dust. So we have to ask ourselves, if a plague of locusts would get us to repent, if a disaster to our land or livelihood would stir us into action, why doesn't the threat of hell?

Truth be told, we have the same problem that the ancient Israelites did: we see the day of the Lord only as a good thing. Because, of course, we're going to be saved. Of course, we have nothing to fear. Of course, God has good things in store for us.

We take for granted God's love to such a degree that we forget that we don't deserve it. That, by all rights, the day of the Lord's coming should be a day of darkness and weeping for us. A day of terror and suffering for us.

Because it is the wrath of God poured out upon sinners. It is the fire of God burning against those who have disobeyed him. It is the locusts of God's wrath, come to consume those who do not love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Come to devour those who do not love their neighbor with utter selflessness. With just as much concern as they love themselves.

And so we hear the Word of the Lord to begin this Old Testament reading, *"Yet even now, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments."*

Return to the Lord, not simply with the outward trappings of Lent. With ash on your forehead and somber songs on your lips and with a few extra midweek services on your schedule. Rend not simply your garments. Rend your hearts.

Return to the Lord with an honest acknowledgment that I don't deserve his grace. I don't deserve his favor. I deserve to be devoured by locusts. I deserve to be cast into the darkness that the day of the Lord brings to sinners like me.

Return to the Lord, your God, not so that you can take for granted his grace. Not so that you can assume his mercy. But so that you can see him anew for just how gracious and merciful he is.

*"Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and he relents over disaster."* He relents over a plague of locusts. He relents over the wrath to be poured out upon sinners. He relents over judging you and me exactly as we deserve.

Paul tells us, *"Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."* Now – right now – is the time in which God has relented and left a blessing behind for you. The blessing of Word and Sacrament. The blessing of being baptized into his kingdom and fed his own Body and Blood. The blessing of seeing his own Son nailed to a cross for our sake and in our stead.

God has relented of the disaster we deserve and cast it upon Christ instead. And it wasn't a swarm of locusts who devoured him. No, it was a swarm of Pharisees. A swarm of chief priests and teachers of the law. A swarm of his own people, whom he loved with all his heart. Ripping the very flesh off his bones with whips and nails and a crown of thorns on his head. And casting him into the darkness of a tomb.

All so that we might live. So that we might be spared. So that we might know that we serve a God of grace and mercy. Who relents of disaster and leaves blessings for those who love him.

Return to the Lord, for he is just. Return to the Lord, for he is powerful. Return to the Lord, for his day is coming, and it will mean judgment for sinners just like you. Rend your hearts and return to him.

For he is gracious and merciful. Return to the Lord, for he is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Return to the Lord, for today is the day of salvation through His Son. Who gave up his life that he might return to you. Amen.