

The Year of the Locusts

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 1, 1989, the 20th Sunday after Pentecost. Scripture Lesson: Joel 2:23-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Ten years ago or so, when we still lived in Reedsville, Pennsylvania Gypsy Moths invaded central Pennsylvania. I remember riding through the mountains in late Spring on my way to our Presbytery camp and noticing the devastation that the Gypsy Moths were wreaking. Over a period of a year you could mark the steady advance of the moths by the dead and leafless trees as they advanced up and over the mountains.

The prophet Joel, living in Jerusalem hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, witnessed an environmental disaster far worse. From the North, countless hoards of locusts flew into the land of Palestine like an invading army. Great clouds of locusts blotted out the light of the noonday sun above the city of Jerusalem. Wave after wave they came in enormous numbers, settling on the fields and hillsides. Men and women were driven inside in terror.

Those who were caught outside when the locusts swarmed around them could hardly breathe. The locusts hit against their faces, blinded them, and lodged in their ears and noses. If their mouths were opened they were in danger of breathing in locusts and choking. They could hear the crunch of hundreds of locusts beneath ^{their} feet with every step they took. The yellow juice from the ~~the~~ crushed bodies stained their feet and sandals.

Then the locusts settled on the fields and hillsides where they laid their eggs in vast numbers. Some 60,000 locusts can come from the eggs planted in a square yard of soil. Once hatched, the new broods started crawling across the ground at a rate of 400 to 600 feet a day devouring every scrap of vegetation in their path. Crops were destroyed. Grain in

the fields were devoured. The grapes on the vine were ruined, the olive trees denuded. Famine stalked the land. Men, women, and children starved. The cost of a loaf of bread skyrocketed as it has in Guyana where the daily wage is \$29 and a loaf of bread costs \$32.

So bad was the plague of locusts that at times the daily sacrifices in the temple had to be discontinued. The fire on the altar went out. The smoke of the burning incense symbolizing the prayers of the people stopped. The sanctuary was empty. The Lord seemed to have abandoned his people. The people suffered not only from famine; they suffered spiritually. They felt cut off from God. ~~Praise for the Lord ceased from their lips.~~ *No one could praise the LORD.* They could only lament their misery. They felt despised by God and ashamed.

People feared the world was coming to an end. Preachers, including the Prophet Joel, warned of the end of the world and God's judgment. They fasted, they openly wept... men, women, and children. They tore their clothes in their anguish. They could see no hope. Their dreams and visions for a better future were eaten up by the locusts.

And when the plague ended and they could go outside once more and witness the devastation the people began to creep back to the temple... to the place which had been for them the visible symbol of the presence of God. The old came leaning on the shoulders of their sons and daughters. The youth came stumbling, impatient, not certain why they were coming. Infants were carried in the arms of their parents, crying and frightened. Hunger and despair erased all social distinctions between servants and masters, men and women, young and old. All were brought down to the same level.

And then the Lord spoke to them through Joel, and said, "I will give you

back what you lost in the years when swarms of locusts ate your crops. It was I who sent this army against you. Now you will have plenty to eat, and be satisfied. You will praise the Lord your God, who has done wonderful things for you. My people will never be despised again. Then, Israel, you will know that I am among you and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. My people will never be despised again." The people didn't know whether to believe or doubt. Was this really the word of the Lord or was it merely the voice of human hopes and dreams?

But the plague lifted. The locusts left. The Winter, Spring and Autumn rains came in just the right amounts. The harvest was plentiful. The threshing places were full of grain; the vats beside the grape presses overflowed with wine and olive oil. The people ate and were satisfied. They had plenty. The years lost to the locust were restored. The judgment foreshadowed by the locust plague was averted. The people praised the Lord for all the wonderful things he had done.

All of us have years that the locusts have eaten... the year your mom or dad died... the year of the divorce... the year you were out of work... the year you felt so depressed for no apparent reason... the year the doctor said you had cancer.

There are times when you think the end of your world is near. You feel the impending judgment of God. You feel abandoned by God. Your refrigerator is filled with food. Your freezer and pantry is overflowing but you feel a hunger to hear God speak to you... a hunger for the presence of the Lord... some sign that God loves you... some sign that God is in control... that God hasn't abandoned you. You go to church but the Lord doesn't really speak to you. The fire goes out in your soul. You stop praying. You feel alienated, lonely, isolated. Your dreams for your family

and for yourself do not come true. Your dreams turn to nightmares.

That's how the people of Zion felt at times even after the Lord gave them back what they had lost in the years when the locusts ate their crops. They had all the material things they wanted but they still longed for something material things couldn't satisfy. They knew that life was more than simply having enough food to eat, a job, and a family. They wanted dreams and visions. They were hungry for a word of the Lord to make sense out of their everyday experience.

And the Lord spoke to that longing. He didn't immediately satisfy their hungry. He gave them a promise that a day was coming when their deepest longing would be satisfied. "I will pour out my spirit on everyone: your sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your old men will have dreams, and your young men will see visions. ~~At that time I will pour out~~ my spirit even on servants, both men and women."

What a thing to say. To talk of ordinary people, young men and young girls, laboring people and all sorts, having God's Spirit just as truly as the prophets, having heavenly visions and being able to talk about God for themselves! Joel didn't say when he expected it to happen, or how long it would be, but he did say that it would come.

The New Testament writers saw this fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when the Church was baptized by the Holy Spirit. But I also see this happening today in our church. In the last several weeks we've listened in Sunday School to our sons and daughters tell us what they hear God saying about the future of our church. Old and young, men and women, are dreaming dreams and seeing visions of what God wants to accomplish through us as a congregation in Christian Education, in various church activities, in missions, in worship.

The Lord, speaking through Joel, says, "I will give warnings of that day... there will be fire and clouds of smoke." There has been fire and clouds of smoke. We've seen the results of that fire and smoke in the rubble our old sanctuary. But I see the fire and clouds of smoke as the harbingers of a new day for our congregation... a day when all of us will come to know the Lord personally... all of us will hear the Lord directing us... all of us will see visions and dream dreams of what the Lord wants to do through us and in us into the future. I'm looking forward to that day. It will come. It will surely come. We have the Lord's own word on that. Amen.