

October 23, 2022

Restore the Years the Locusts Have Eaten

Joel 2:23-32, Psalm 65, Gospel Reading: Luke 18:9-14

In *Jurassic World: Dominion* there's an unexpected species of large previously extinct locusts. They have been genetically modified by Biosyn and Dr. Henry Wu, to be stronger. The locusts were originally designed to spread genetic modifications to non-Biosyn crops that would allow them to become immune to drought, frosts, and diseases as part of a project named Hexapod Allies. However, since they are engineered to not feed on Biosyn seeds, they start to eat every other plant in sight and spiral even further out of control than anticipated, threatening a global ecological collapse.

"Locusts? Why does there have to be locusts?" Enough Jurassic Park. To the Bible. To the book. I promise you there is help for all of us.

In Joel, there's a locust invasion and it looks like the end of the world. Make no mistake: The buzz of the swarming locusts is a scary, Halloween sound.

Scholars have coined the word, "precarity" to define this moment in our lives. Theologians prefer the word apocalyptic. Regular people, like us, we use the word "scared."

I'm not predicting a horde of genetically modified super locusts swooping down on the country, but "locusts" is an Old Testament metaphor for all the destructive, negative, hurtful, demeaning thoughts that swarm and buzz in your mind keeping you off balance – nervous, anxious, scared. Too many of God's people are suffering from "P" – Political Traumatic Syndrome – all that buzzing in our heads. A self-proclaimed prophet, for example, recently announced that the "Death Angel" was coming for a list of about 30 people, and they would all be dead by the end of the year. False prophet no doubt. But here's a brief test for you. Do you believe everything that your side says about the other side? If the answer is yes, the locusts are swarming in your head. If you say, "I believe it" to every conspiracy theory, every accusation, every word that falls into social media from unknown places, "I believe" is your go-to response, the locusts are swarming.

A woman was being baptized by immersion one Sunday and she didn't know that the preacher would dunk her under the water 3 times – Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. But the preacher put her under the water and brought her to "Do you believe?" She cried, "I believe." Second time, same as the first. "Do you believe?" "I believe." Third time, "Do you believe?" "Preacher I believe, I believe you trying to drown me." Don't believe everything. Question stuff.

Can you name the place in your life that has been like a swarm of locusts, and imagine that Joel's message is for that part of your life?

There's one locust plague that will go away on the day after the election: political ads. For three months I have had my football games, baseball games, and now, basketball games messed with by ads depicting all candidates as lying, cheating, low-life, stupid, crazy, dangerous, fake, mentally ill people who are trying to destroy America. I look forward to the day after the election.

You and I are still stuck with the locusts – insatiable creatures leaving nothing but fear. Complaining about the locusts may be necessary for mental sanity, but locusts can't be stopped by complaining. It's like complaining about the heat in a Louisiana August or a New York January. A negative spirit destroys community. I've seen it happen to college football teams. When a football team starts to lose, the "locusts" come. Whining, complaining, criticizing. "Fire the coach" becomes the cry. Whatever the cost 10 20 30 million – pay the guy and run him out of town. Everything becomes negative. Fewer people at the stadium. Grumbling at the bars. Millions lost by local businesses when the fans stop showing up for the games. Letters to the sports editor filled with vitriol. Once the locust plague starts, there's no stopping it.

I have a friend who every time someone said something negative about someone, he would say one positive thing about them. Ended a lot of conversations. I once became the pastor of a church with the most negative spirit I had ever encountered. Even the staff was afflicted. I announced in a staff meeting, "There will be no negative comments in this meeting for the next six months. Not a single one. If you can't say something positive, don't say anything at all. If you start to utter a negative, critical thought, I will start praying out loud until you stop." We had to change the spirit of that church before we could grow that church.

We can lose "spirit," like the air going out of a hot air balloon as it crashes to the ground. The locust swarm robs God's people of their imagination, creativity, and trust. The world hardens some people. The locust swarm eats away the joy of life until there's nothing left but a sense that the world is against you.

Where is God when the locusts swarm? God is active and present. How can we ever lose sight of the presence of God – a constant, total presence?

Listen to Joel. He knows his Bible. He knows the story of Exodus: "The LORD, your God . . . is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." The word of grace comes during the noise of the swarming locusts. "You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other."

Joel insists that all of creation participates in the grace of God. With God it's never just about humans as if the rest of creation doesn't matter. Have you ever noticed the ending of the book of Jonah? God asks, "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Joel speaks to all creation: "Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield." For Joel animals have feelings, grass has feelings, the fruit trees have feelings. All of creation matters because as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it we need awareness of the "amazingly intricate ways in which we are interwoven with [nature]".

After the locust swarm, the call to worship: "Yet even now, says the LORD, **return to me** with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people." Call the people together.

"Gather the people." Get back to the church. You may be concerned about the midterm elections, but I am talking about something far more meaningful" Return to God.

You show up here and your presence shines more light into the darkness. You come to church on Sunday, and you are battling terrorism, violence, hatred, and all the powers and principalities. You show up here and you are lending your voice, your support to the cosmic power of goodness, the persuasive power of God. I'm talking about building a sense of community, of belonging to one another. Watching a British tv series, *Silent Witness*, there's a scene where two government officials show up at the home of an army family. You can see other wives racing across the street to be there because they know the officials have come to tell the wife that her husband has been killed in action. There for one another. I'm talking about community.

This morning around 4:00 a.m. there was a fire at the house across the street. The police called Bart and Marilyn. They came down and opened the doors of the church so that the people who had to leave their homes needed a warm place. Our church providing shelter for those in need – that's what I'm saying. Our church as a refuge, a center of community, as a place for us to be together – share our deepest needs.

On Sunday morning when I ask you to share your concerns and celebrations, I feel like the word "concerns" is too small. I always want to say, "Share your fears, your failures, your pains, your sorrows, your deepest feelings." I want to say that but, like you, I am afraid. Church has not really been a safe enough place to tell one another everything has it?

The church is a sacred assembly, a gathering of God's people and it spreads over all time. The church is like a great field of dreams. From mega-church to store-front start-up to Gothic cathedrals, angels and a great cloud of witnesses are all there. If you worship, they will come. William Portier, Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Dayton, borrowing from the wonderful baseball movie, "Field of Dreams," says, "Coming out of the corn and into the light, instead of Shoeless Joe Jackson and the 1919 Chicago White Sox, are Peter and Paul, Martha and Mary, Teresa and Felicity, Francis and Dominic, Aquinas and Augustine, Barth and Bonhoeffer, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney, Henry Ward Beecher and John Howard Yoder, William Sloane Coffin, Jr. and Martin Luther King, Jr., and all the faithful women and men whose names we know as if they were members of our immediate family."ⁱ

In church we call it the communion of saints. After the locust swarm, this gathering is our hope. God is attracted to those "hot spots" where sinners on bended knees gather and weep, "God have mercy on me a sinner." Blow the trumpet. Assemble the people.

When my children were young there was one thing that scared me – the words emblazoned on the side of huge boxes: SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED. While those words excite an engineer, they put the fear of God in me. Inside the box, which took a chainsaw to open, a twenty-page document and enough screws, nuts, bolts to build a cathedral. SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.

But there's one time when I am thrilled by the words, SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED. When the locusts swarm there's always the body of Christ – the congregation, the people of God. **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.** Life is like that big box of parts: some assembly is required to keep us connected to creation, to God, to one another.

And now the promise: I WILL RESTORE THE YEARS THE SWARMING LOCUST HAS EATEN. It's an over-the-top promise. God restores what we almost destroy. When all seems lost, when the locusts have eaten every plant to the nub, out of the left-for-dead stump of Jesse, a green shoot appears. May God restore the meaning of Christian faith: "They will know we are Christians by our love" rather than our position on gay marriage, abortion, the environment, immigration, or inflation. May God restore the song in Christian congregations:

"We are one in the Spirit
We are one in the Lord
And we pray that all unity
May one day be restored

And they'll know we are Christians
By our love, By our love
We will walk with each other
We will walk hand in hand
And together we'll spread the news
That God is in our land
Make us one, Lord!

God reconstitutes life from death. Luke must have known Joel's promise: A tax collector cries, "God be merciful to me, a sinner," and Jesus says, "I will restore the years." A widow cries, "Give me justice," and Jesus says, "I will restore the years." Ten lepers call out, "Have mercy on us," and Jesus says, "I will restore the years." Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead and restores the years. Don't you see? The promise belongs to you. I WILL RESTORE THE YEARS THAT THE LOCUST HAS EATEN! Try it! Ask God for help! AMEN!!

ⁱ William L. Portier, "Assembly Required: Christ's Presence in the Pews," *Commonweal*, March 8, 2013.