A better Day’s A-Coming

Twenty-third After Pentecost 2019

Joel 2:23-32

*After that I will pour out my Spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions.in those days, I will also pour out my spirit on the male and female slaves.*

*Joel 2:28-29*

Well, here we are in our once-every-three-year excursus into the tiny book in the Hebrew Bible we call Joel. Joel is one of the so-called Minor Prophets, known as such, not because they matter less, but because they are a bit more obscure and lesser known. Joel, by most scholarly guesstimates, lived and wrote about four centuries before the birth of Jesus. Even if we don’t read his writing very much, many of us know the book because Peter quotes from this book in his famous sermon at Pentecost. More about that later.

A short summary of the book is quite simple: a swarm of locusts devastates the crops of the Hebrew farmers; they are left in ruins. Joel interprets this disaster as a judgment from God. Whereas some of the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah get really specific about what ticked God off, Joel leaves it to the people’s imagination – and ours, as we read about it millennia later. They should know and we should be able to guess; whatever, it must have cultivated judgment in the heart of God, according to the prophet.

Joel calls the people to a season of repentance, mourning, and fasting. Apparently, the people heeded Joel’s admonition, because the word of the Lord comes to the people from Joel, promising a brighter, greener day. Not only a time of prosperity, but also a time of spiritual awakening. That’s the gist of Joel.

So what does this mean for us? Do we just take it as an interesting piece of history, say *fascinating,* and move on? No, I think it’s more than ancient history; there’s a word here for us.

It is difficult to determine whether Joel really had an insect infestation in mind or merely uses the image of the locusts as a metaphor for the armies of one enemy or another. To be sure, such locust plagues were not rare in ancient Israel, I suspect. Nor were the foreign armies that took turns conquering and occupying Israel’s homeland. Even now in our own time, no one quite knows why, all of a sudden, grasshoppers turn into vast multitudes of flying, crunching, devouring clouds of what we call locusts. After all, locusts are in fact grasshoppers on steroids. And their onslaught can certainly be devastating. We here in Hawaii know little about locusts. Okay, if you live in certain parts of the continental US, you may know about cicadas, too. Cicadas hibernate for about sixteen years and, in the seventeenth, they awaken to wreak havoc on trees and plants, make a horrendous racket (hey, wouldn’t you, if you awoke from a seventeen-year nap?), and crunch under our shoes as they lie in *rigor mortis* on the sidewalks and driveways. But this phenomenon is predictable and explainable. It’s part of nature.

Here in Hawaii we are aware of the plight of our beautiful O’hia trees. They are dying at a frightening rate. Mostly on the Big Island, Rapid O’hia Death (ROD) is caused by a fungus that destroys these trees quickly, hence ROD.

Back to Joel. To the prophet, this natural disaster finds its cause in human activity. He regards it as a sign of God’s divine disapproval of the people’s immoral actions. Joel gives us a picture of God sitting in heaven, on a righteous throne of judgment, watching every little thing we do. If we do something that goes against God’s divine will, God zaps us in one way or another, not always with a swarm of locusts. Is that your understanding of who God is and how God acts?

Let’s look at it in another way. I believe God, in the divine act of creation, created a lawful universe. The world functions according to physical laws. We may not know all of those laws, but that’s because we are mortals, with limitations to our knowledge. We discover more and more of those laws as time passes, and there are more to find.

Newton once posited that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. There is a cause-and-effect correlation. Whatever happens, something happens as a result of that action. That is one of the laws in our physical world.

In the same way, God has created our world to function according to moral laws as well. I believe we live in a moral universe, one which functions morally. That may be a bit more difficult concept to wrap your heard around. When you do something of a moral nature, good or bad, it has consequences. When you lie or cheat, that act has consequences. Something happens as a result of your lie. When you commit a random act of kindness, that action has consequences. You may not see the consequence; it may not even impact you. But somewhere, sometime, inevitably that action will have an effect.

So how do we look at the locusts here in Joel? Did God literally judge the people by putting out a trumpet call to an army of locusts, who were standing by, waiting for the word from God to attack? I don’t see it that way. Rather, when the people acted immorally, their actions had consequences. It’s simply the way the universe was created.

But we have to be careful here. There are some things that happen that cannot be explained. There are tragedies that occur that cannot be explained. When two people both get the same cancer, and one is able to recover and the other dies, does it mean one person acted badly and the other didn’t? No, that certainly is not true. What I am talking about are moral and immoral acts and their consequences.

In Joel, when the people repent, genuinely expressing their sorrow over their actions, God forgives. It is not that the consequences did not occur, the locusts did devastate their crops, but the way of life that they practiced no longer alienated them from God. In repentance and forgiveness, the relationship was restored.

But even beyond that, God promised them a future. That’s when Joel is given a vision:

*In those days, I will also pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days, I will also pour out my spirit on the male and female slaves.* [Joel 2: 28-29]

This promise was near and dear to the people of Israel. When there were no visions or dreams, it was a sign that God was no longer in their midst. It meant God frowned upon the people. That void was literally the judgment of God.

Where are the visionaries and dreamers in our midst today? Do we have wise elders dreaming dreams? Young men and women with visions of where God is leading us? Is the Holy Spirit moving in our midst? Some among us worry about our survival. I understand that. But if we are guided along our journey by a survival instinct, we shall surely fail. But if we are guided by a vision of where the Spirit is leading us, the future is bright. I implore us all to listen to the visionaries in our midst as we make our way through these challenging moments. God is not through with us. Of that I am convinced. For that I am grateful. Thanks be to God.