

29 March 2020

Looking for God

Joel 1:1-20

We begin with a reading from the first chapter of the prophetic book of Joel. Chapter 1, vv. 1-3:

1 The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel:

*2 Hear this, O elders,
give ear, all inhabitants of the land!
Has such a thing happened in your days,
or in the days of your ancestors?*

*3 Tell your children of it,
and let your children tell their children,
and their children another generation.*

Periodically in human history, there have come times when everything is overturned. All the comforting routines that make our lives go smoothly are disrupted, and the accepted ideas that people absorb from their culture are thrown into doubt. As I say, from a historical perspective this happens regularly, but it is infrequent enough that when it happens, it feels unprecedented, earth-shaking, unlike anything that has ever happened before or will ever happen again. It feels, well, like the first verses of the book of Joel: *Has such a thing happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation.*

In Joel's case, the crisis was a locust swarm. Now, that doesn't sound so bad – a lot of bugs? That's all? – but in the days before pesticides, this really could be cataclysmic, and this particular swarm was beyond that. Clouds of locusts blotted out the sun. When they settled on the fields they devoured all the crops (which, of course, included the seed for the next year's crop); when they landed in vineyards, they ate the vines down to the ground, destroying years of work and the next several years of yield; when they settled on the pastures, they left nothing for the sheep or cattle; and they even stripped every branch of every fruit tree. In short, this was a disaster that presaged years of starvation. Let's read some more – the rest of chapter one.

*4 What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten.*

*5 Wake up, you drunkards, and weep;
and wail, all you wine-drinkers,
over the sweet wine,
for it is cut off from your mouth.*

*6 For a nation has invaded my land,
powerful and innumerable;*

*its teeth are lions' teeth,
and it has the fangs of a lioness.*

⁷ *It has laid waste my vines,
and splintered my fig trees;
it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;
their branches have turned white.*

⁸ *Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth
for the husband of her youth.*

⁹ *The grain-offering and the drink-offering are cut off
from the house of the Lord.*

*The priests mourn,
the ministers of the Lord.*

¹⁰ *The fields are devastated,
the ground mourns;
for the grain is destroyed,
the wine dries up, the oil fails.*

¹¹ *Be dismayed, you farmers,
wail, you vine-dressers,
over the wheat and the barley;
for the crops of the field are ruined.*

¹² *The vine withers,
the fig tree droops.
Pomegranate, palm, and apple—
all the trees of the field are dried up;
surely, joy withers away
among the people.*

¹³ *Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests;
wail, you ministers of the altar.
Come, pass the night in sackcloth,
you ministers of my God!
Grain-offering and drink-offering
are withheld from the house of your God.*

¹⁴ *Sanctify a fast,
call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the Lord your God,
and cry out to the Lord.*

¹⁵ *Alas for the day!
For the day of the Lord is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.*

¹⁶ *Is not the food cut off
before our eyes,
joy and gladness
from the house of our God?*

¹⁷ *The seed shrivels under the clods,
the storehouses are desolate;
the granaries are ruined
because the grain has failed.*

¹⁸ *How the animals groan!
The herds of cattle wander about
because there is no pasture for them;
even the flocks of sheep are dazed.*

¹⁹ *To you, O Lord, I cry.
For fire has devoured
the pastures of the wilderness,
and flames have burned
all the trees of the field.*

²⁰ *Even the wild animals cry to you
because the watercourses are dried up,
and fire has devoured
the pastures of the wilderness.*

In this lament, you hear not only the catalogue of destruction, but also something else: an attempt to understand this disaster in the context of God. This is not unusual. In times of great upheaval, when the normal patterns of our life collapse, people often think about God – maybe for the first time in years. Now, I do *not* mean to say that they all discover or rediscover faith. Some do, some don't. But times of stress do pull away the shell of our normal daily life and force us to look farther and deeper. In our chapter from Joel, we see at least three different ways to think about God in a time of crisis.

First, there's verse 13: *Come, pass the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God! Grain-offering and drink-offering are withheld from the house of your God.* Or, to put Joel's anxiety another way, "Good Lord! What's this going to do to the collection plate?" We don't actually know anything about the prophet Joel – not even which century he lived in – but I know a minister when I hear one. This guy worked for the church. And, to be fair, I have some sympathy for his angst. I've had those thoughts. But I also think we can agree that in a time of impending death, maybe this isn't the most important thing to obsess over.

Second, there's v. 15: *Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.* Or, "Why is God doing this to us?" It's not a terrible question to ask. A horrible thing has happened, and the God whom we claim is "Almighty" didn't stop it. Or, worse, maybe God initiated it. Either way, though, why? Is it a punishment for sin? Have we offended God in some dramatic new way? Now, I do not believe that this line of thought ultimately leads to God, but it's an important question, and the person asking it is taking God seriously. We need to deal with this, but I'm going to come back to this question in a few

weeks, when I can devote a whole sermon to it. For now it's enough to point out that asking God why is a normal response to unthinkable tragedy.

But there's a third way that Joel looks for God. I read from verses 14 and 19: *Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord. . . To you, O Lord, I cry.* The third response is simply to turn to God in prayer, crying out in distress, asking for God's deliverance.

Now this might feel a little strange, coming alongside the verse that blames God for bringing the catastrophe to begin with. Maybe it is a little strange, logically, but it's standard operating procedure in the Bible. Throughout the book, people who believe that God has brought disaster upon them nevertheless bow down in prayer and beg God to have a change of heart. And, generally, God listens. One of my favorite psalms is Psalm 73 – one of those written by that mysterious Levite Asaph. It starts out by bemoaning the injustice that God permits on earth – the plight of the poor and the prosperity of the wicked. It feels as if a just God should manage things better. But in the end, Asaph returns to asking God for help, because, to paraphrase his words, “You're all I got. Who do I have on my side in the heavens if not you? And in the end, whether I understand you or not, you're all I want.” After all's said and done, this is where Joel goes, too. “God, I don't know why you let this happen, but I believe you are good, and I believe you listen to cries of distress, so we're going to pray. Help us, Lord. The locusts have left us nothing. You're all we have.

And here we are, facing what I suspect is one of those once-in-a-lifetime disasters. At least we hope it's only once-in-a-lifetime. At this point, most of us have experienced it as an inconvenience, rather than a catastrophe, but we also know that we're in the early days. We see what the new coronavirus has done in other countries, and we know that even if we started our social distancing in time and managed to “flatten the curve” significantly, we are looking at hard days to come. People who have no symptoms of the new coronavirus today – maybe some of us – will be sick this time next week. Some of those who get sick will not get better. In the larger society, some of the businesses that are now closed will not reopen, and some the jobs that are now idled will not return. We are like the Israelites, watching the swarm of locusts approach, gradually blotting out the sun, and we know that the effects of this spring will be felt for years and decades to come.

In this time, with the locusts overhead but not yet on the ground, some may be turning to ask questions of God. Again, let me stress that this does *not* mean that we should expect people to come flooding back into church when the door opens again. It doesn't necessarily work that way; the calamity of World War I had exactly the opposite effect. All that this renewed turning toward God means is that people are asking questions that six months ago it wouldn't have occurred to them to ask. So in these coming weeks, I'm going to be asking some of those questions with you, suggesting ways to look for God in the midst of crisis.

Because in a time of disequilibrium, looking for God is real. I suppose you could say that most of us look for God in one way or another, but in the normal way of things, when life is humming along all right for us, we only look for the God that we want to find. In essence, what most of us do is look for a designer God, one to fill the gap in whatever unique area we feel insecure in. Thus, grieving people tend to look for a comforter God, lonely people tend to look for a loving God, angry people often look for a God of vengeance (assuming, of course, that that God is their side), and rich people tend to look for a hobby God who gives them something that

makes them feel good about themselves on weekends but who stays discreetly out of the way at the office. We all want a God who adapts to our own perceived needs. And God can provide some of those things – comfort, love, meaning – but God is never content to leave it at that. God does not conform to our specs. If we’re really looking for God, we have to expect God to be more than we were looking for, because God is always asking us to think differently, behave differently, become something new. God is good, but as far as I can tell, God is never convenient.

But when we look for God from the bottom of the pit, at a time when we realize that we need everything, not just a trim around the edges – that’s when we’re most likely to actually find the living God. That’s who we’ll be looking for in the weeks to come. But the first step is, as it was for Joel and for Asaph, to bow humbly before God and say, “We don’t know why this is happening, but you’re all we got. Help, Lord God. Help.”