

Sermon - The Locusts are coming!

Joel: 1: 1-15; 2:18-27

Luke 18: 9-14

I was delighted to learn that Trinity is offering the Alpha course this fall and it sounds like it is not the first time either. I am a fan of the Alpha course. Last year we lead about 20 people through Alpha at West Vancouver United and we had a fabulous time. Most of the group were long time Christians but it gave us a chance to talk about our faith and go deeper and invite someone along who wasn't Christian. For those of you who aren't familiar with Alpha, it started in Britain as a Christian teaching tool and was run in churches, homes, workplaces, prisons, and universities. I think at last count 24 million people have done the Alpha Course. We meet, eat a meal together and watch a different Alpha film each week followed by some discussion for 12 weeks.

In the Alpha film, 'Why Did Jesus Die?' we meet Shane. He has a thick, rough British accent. He tells us, *"I got in with the wrong crowd. We started to pinch cars, burgle houses..... I was the kinda person who if you pulled a knife I would use it on you".* Shane was on the run for two attempted murders. When he went to prison he stabbed a prison officer and ended up in maximum security. In prison he was sent to do an Alpha course. Each week he went and just argued. After a few weeks the pastor visited and said, *Right now, I'm going to read some scripture and we're going to say a few prayers."* And Shane specifically remembered the passages the pastor read. He says it to us with tears in his eyes. *"No one's righteous, not one, we all fall short of the glory of God."* The pastor told Shane to pray. Shane said, *"I remember saying, God, God, if you're real. Come into my life, because I hate who I am."* Then, he said, nothing happened. But as he was talking to the pastor he felt a strange energy in his stomach and then he just broke out in uncontrollable tears. *"I sobbed", he said, "Because that was the change of my whole life."* Eventually Shane was released, he got married and had five kids, who he said were the best gift ever, apart from the grace God had given him.

Now that's a **great turn around**. That is what is happening in the passage of Joel, a **great turn around** for an entire people.

Will you pray with me?

“Jesus, may I never lightly presume to know your word. May I always remember to humbly speak your word, for in your Word is life.” Amen.

Most Canadians have a misconception that Australians are good with bugs. Actually, I am not at all good with bugs. Big bugs or small bugs. I don't like bugs. And the prophet, Joel, warns us today that there is an army of bugs on the horizon. The 'Cutting' locust, the 'Swarming' locust, the 'Hopping' locust and even, the 'Destroying' locust. (1:4) David Attenborough, the great naturalist says, “there is no other species on the planet that responds as quickly and dramatically to the good times, as the locust. Eggs that have remained dormant in the ground for 20 years, begin to hatch. The Hoppers, not yet ready to fly, follow the smell of sprouting grass along the ground. As their food run out the flying locusts send out chemical signals to the group that they must move on and groups merge, and they merge until they form a swarm, devouring hundreds of tones of vegetation in their wake.

But there's a problem. Joel tells us it also happens to be a time of drought. So there is nothing left for the locust to eat. Perhaps nothing other than our own flesh. Joel is warning us, total destruction is imminent. With such an impending crisis on the horizon our anxiety would be unmanageable. And here's the thing, this is happening in chapter 1 of Joel which means he gives us no indication that the plague is deserved. Life seems to simply be throwing the Israelites a huge curve ball. Life can do that sometimes. A crisis never comes at a convenient time or for a sufficient reason. As Trappist monk, Thomas Merton said, “there is no sufficient account that can be given for our suffering”.¹ “But

¹ Merton, Thomas – No Man is an Island. (Edition 1) (2003) Chapter 5. The Word of the Cross. Mariner Books Boston MA.

faith”, he said, “also knows that the mercy of God is given to those who seek Him in suffering...”

“Lament” Joel cries “Lament like a virgin dressed in a sack cloth for the husband of her youth.” (1:8) (Repeat) (I like that line, so passionate) “Put a sackcloth on, lament you priests, wail you ministers of the altar.” (1:13) “Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land.....and cry out to the Lord.” (1:14)

Now isn't this a strange kind of response the prophet Joel calls for? The world, as the Israelites know it is about to be consumed, which is prescient because that is what we hear on our news also, our planet is being consumed, and Joel simply says, “Well, um, how about we just gather ourselves together and cry out?” Sixteen-year-old environmental activist, Greta Thunberg would not be impressed by a meager call for lament. “Don't be cry baby”, we're told when we're kids or “Don't play the victim card with me!” we're told as an adult. Which is always a way to weaken your expectation of comfort.

But in the ancient world, lamenting was more than a cry of powerlessness. It was not meant for another human with meager human capacity to hear. A lament is to petition to God the Creator of the universe. It is to turn our hearts to God from a place of fear toward trust. Faith comes from battling our deepest fears². The words we utter in lament expose our profound anxieties. As Shane prayed, “God if you are real, show yourself, because I hate my life.” Which really means, God nobody in the universe other than you could possibly love me and if you are not real, there is no hope for me. When there is a battalion of locusts ready to consume us, when we are finally at the end of our rope, outdone by fear and anxiety and hopelessness, humbled, finally, then we begin to whistle in the dark and cry out to God's mercy to turn things around.³ (pause)

² Davis, Ellen F. *Preaching the Luminous Word: Biblical Sermons and Homiletical Essays*. (2016) Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan. p. 27.

³ Davis, et al. p.215

I enjoy finding out who taught my teachers. Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche, communities for people developmental disabilities, is one of my favorite teachers. I have a daughter on the autistic spectrum but Jean Vanier taught me long before I knew our daughter. He writes and speaks about how disabled people teach us how to be more human. Even after his incredible success as a leader, a writer, a political advocate, Jean Vanier always embodied the virtue of humility. Before starting his first L'Arche community he spent a year living in a monastery with his teacher Father Thomas Philippe who taught him this, "We must not disdain the prayer of petition (*i.e. lament*). It is available to everyone and is the normal prayer of every creature as such. It is the prayer that comes forth from us spontaneously as soon as we sense that we have nothing, that we are beggars." "In periods of dryness, we can always beg God to bring us into a more intimate relationship with Himself. Petition is the humblest form of prayer, but through it, prayer first enters into our lives and takes hold of us most easily."⁴ Jean Vanier learned a relationship to God is born out of humility.

When I am not turned toward God in humility, I notice it is impossible for me to forgive the people who have truly wounded me. And I notice I am always more anxious. What if I can't handle this? What if I make a mistake? And when I am not turned to God in humility I lose hope for a better future. I have a failure of imagination that any good can come out of my darkness. And in despair, I am too fearful to make any change at all. When I am not toward God, the locusts are always on my tail.

Did you notice though, Joel calls a whole community to lament. It is a corporate act. When a whole community is not turned to God, just as I experience, the whole community struggles to forgive global neighbors who have wounded them. When we fail to acknowledge God and rely on our own self-sufficiency, we all live in a state of anxiety, coveting our resources in fear there won't be enough. Frozen in despair a whole

⁴ Fr. Thomas Philippe, OP. *The Contemplative Life*. 2nd Ed. (2009) The Dominican Nuns. Summit, New Jersey. p. 36.

people are unable to form a vision of a future beyond what is and do nothing rather than something. Without a communal posture of humility everything is at stake for everyone.⁵ The locusts continue haunt us all and surely as Joel says in verse 12, “joy withers away from humankind’ (1:12). Lamenting, on the other hand, becomes the expression of an attitude to God and human life that shapes the entire people of God and it’s done on behalf of the interests of the whole community. When the church cries out, “Come Lord, come” (Rev. 22:20), it is not a cry to save ourselves, but a cry to save the world.

When the Israelites lament, there comes a rather unusual response from God. Joel tells us, God became **jealous** (2:18).⁶ Jealousy sounds a like rather childish characteristic for God but the fortunes turn for the Israelites, not when they turn to God, but when God becomes jealous for them. That’s when the turning happens. Usually we become jealous when someone we love gives their attention elsewhere. But God becomes jealous when the Israelites give God their attention. That’s odd. I like to think of it this way. When someone comes to you in trust and says, “Can we talk?” They usually have something troubling them, usually something personal, maybe private, maybe even shameful, and most likely distressing. And our brains have this wonderful capacity called mirror neurons (neurons is just a fancy word for nerves) and we experience their pain and we know their anxiety and we don’t just hear them, we ache for them, such that we may even become jealously protective of them because we care, perhaps we even love them and they just trusted us with something very precious making them vulnerable. And in that precious moment of vulnerability, of intimacy, our relationship with them deepens. It becomes more precious. And that’s what happens when we’re intimate with God. When we make ourselves vulnerable with God and call out in a time of need it shapes our relationship with God, it deepens. And when someone truly hears us, truly understands, in that sharing there is a subtle shift to our perspective that happens. In

⁵ Davis, Ellen et al. p.215

⁶ As in the book of Exodus where we also learn of God’s jealousy. “For you shall have no other God’s before me, for I Yahweh, am a jealous God.” (Ex. 34:14)

the sharing we start to be able to see our abundance rather than our darkness, that we are loved rather than not. To delight for the love we've been given in that moment, rather than be given over to despair for whatever is causing us to be anxious.

To return to Joel, there is such an immediate response from God to lament. Even the natural order is transformed. Where there was drought, now there are fig trees and vines give their full yield. (2:22) The mountains, previously dry as dust, now drip with sweet wine. (3:18) The people enjoy unimaginable prosperity. The **great turning** is occurring, it is the Day of the Lord. It is not just 'A' day and not just 'one' day. The Day of the Lord is a complete change in the prospects of our entire life, a turning beyond anything we could have possibly foreseen, guaranteeing our well-being, our security, our certainty for survival and our ability to know deep joy. God says, "You will eat in plenty and be satisfied and praise the name of the Lord who has dealt wonderously with you." (2:26) "You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel and that I am your God, and there is no other. (2:27) That is what a jealous God sounds like. The God we meet in lament is generous, merciful, and overflowing in steadfast love for us, and jealous.

Remember how I mentioned, I delighted in finding out who taught my teachers? Have you ever wondered who Jesus teacher was? In our gospel passage from Luke, Jesus is teaching the disciples about prayer by telling them the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. "The Pharisee stood and was praying **to himself**". Which suggests, in fact, the Pharisee was perhaps so content with himself – that is, he so thoroughly trusted himself – that he had become his own God, "not like other people".⁷ But the tax collector approaches prayer with God with what seems genuine humility, standing far off, struggling even to raise his eyes to ask for God's mercy. Jesus teacher was his Jewish faith. Jesus teacher was the God of the Israelites we learn of in Joel. The disciples are being taught the same posture of humility. Jesus is also our teacher and is our way into Israel's story. He teaches us how to know and trust God, as merciful. Jesus grafts us into

⁷ Soards M., Dozeman T. and McCabe K. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year C After Pentecost 2. (1994) Abingdon Press, Nashville TN USA. p.99

a story not our own, by grace.⁸ And Jesus, more than just a teacher, embodies his teaching on the cross, **for us**, uttering “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.” To lament, as Father Thomas said, “is the normal prayer of every creature.” And Jesus in his creaturely weakness shows us how to be the most strong. The jealous father responds to the excellence of the Sons humility and raises Jesus, **for us**, so that Jesus may now **give us** his spirit and we too may know the mercy of God, revealed for all times, for all people and we too may be raised. To lament is to grow in hope.

On the last evening of our Alpha course, I asked the group which of the films had most stayed with them. The testimony of Shane, the prisoner, had moved people to tears. I wondered about that on my drive home. I don’t spend much of my time worrying about prisoners. Perhaps I should, but I don’t. I spend most of my time thinking about the things that keep me up at night. The things I worry might happen and create destruction in my life and the lives of the people I love. I think the reason Shane’s story moves us is because we are all prisoners, in a way, hoping for a great turn around. Prisoners of our own fears. The locusts, the cause of our destruction and incapacity, are our worst fears. Our fear of failure, fear of not meeting expectations, fear of being alone, fear of being rejected, fear of never being loved, fear of losing someone we love, fear of losing our mind, or our health or our planet. But either we see God as our life strength or we are defeated by the battalions of locusts encamped around us, finally undone by the fear of death itself.⁹ When a people is self absorbed and self reliant, caught up in a prison of anxiety, political decision-making is born out of fear and there is no grander vision on the horizon other than greed, violence and war. But God is in our midst. God is doing a new thing, it springs forth, do you not perceive it? God will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert (Is.43:19). Strangely, you won’t see God’s new thing by stretching yourself up higher and higher trying to catch a glimpse of it. You will only ever see God’s vision from your knees.

⁸ Byasee, Jason. Surprised By Jesus Again: reading the Bible in Communion with the Saints. Chapter 1. Grafted In. (2019) Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

⁹ Davis et al. p.110

Humility is the capacity for remembering God and being transparent with God with our needs¹⁰. Crying out to God, God if you are real, show yourself. God jealously listens to those who cry for comfort, breaks into our world with an abundance that far outweighs any of our fearful imaginings. Jesus Christ, our Lord, our teacher, hears our prayers and whispers them to the Father on our behalf. And God, the God of Israel, God the Creator and God the Father of all responds with abundant mercy and love. Can you see it? We, the church, are called to see it and in turn called to spread that mercy and love to the ends of the earth.

Amen

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Soards M., Dozeman T. and McCabe K. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year C After Pentecost 2. (1994) Abingdon Press, Nashville TN USA. p.99

¹⁰ Davis et al. p.45