

Hespeler, 27 October, 2019 © Scott McAndless – Baptism  
Joel 2:23-32, Psalm 65, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Luke 18:9-14

**D**id you know that locusts and grasshoppers are actually the same animal? Most grasshoppers live their whole lives without bothering anyone. But something very strange happens in their tiny little brains under some very particular conditions.

When there has been a bad drought, a serious lack of rain, and everything that has been planted begins to wither and die and then there is a break and the rains, long hoped for, finally begin to fall and there is a sudden and abundant new growth of greenery, in that very scenario, its like a switch is flipped inside some species of grasshopper and they become locusts. Nothing physically changes in the insect, but it is completely transformed in its behaviour. It breeds like crazy and begins to swarm and migrate in huge numbers. Locust swarms can grow so big and thick that they completely block out the sun bringing darkness in the middle of the day. That alone is terrifying, but its nothing like destruction that is wrought as these swarms devour absolutely everything that is green in their paths.

Is it any wonder, therefore, that from ancient times, people have had a tendency to blame the formation of locust swarms on the gods? Their arrival just seemed to be so mean and vindictive. You had just lived through a terrible drought, had watched everything that you had planted dry and wither away and then, when things looked the very worst, the rains had come and your heart swelled with joy as you watched everything turn green again and begin to sprout. And then, just when you began to dare to hope again, you see the sky turn black with locusts and watch as every living thing that grows is picked clean. Who wouldn't, at that point, come to the conclusion that the entire universe (or at least some vindictive god) was out to get you?

So I understand why ancient people blamed God for locust swarms (even if I don't agree that God operates like that). I understand because I understand how it feels to go through a very dry time, find a new reason to hope that things might get better and then have that little wisp of hope crushed. I've been through times like that and I wouldn't be surprised if you had too. If you haven't, I'll bet you have a friend or loved one who has. And what do you say to someone who is feeling like that – who is convinced that God must be out to get them? Because I'll tell you that the usual platitudes – “You'll see, everything will work out,” “It's always darkest before the



dawn,” “Just look on the bright side,” – platitudes like that are just not going to cut it.

Well, guess who got the very difficult job of comforting and giving hope to the people of Israel who were feeling exactly like that in the aftermath of a locust swarm: a prophet named Joel. We read a part of his message this morning. How does he try to help the people? First of all, he teaches them that they should find comfort not in promises or optimism but in the very nature of God: **“I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten,”** God says, **“the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you.”**

This is a pledge, a promise, grounded in Godself. “I will repay you,” God is saying, “everything that you have lost is on my account.” It is like the richest person in the world undertook to pay off all of your business losses or your debts. And I think that that is a message you do need to hear at that moment. When, rightly or wrongly, you have become convinced, because of the things that have been happening to you, that God is out to get you, the first thing you need is a corrected view of God. You need to understand that the creator of the universe actually seeks your good and not your harm.

I honestly feel as if this is one of the greatest battles that we face. Many people’s problems, their low self-esteem, their struggles with feelings of guilt or shame, their sense that they are never good enough, are rooted in the false image of God that people have given to them. If the image of God that was given to you by your parents or that was perhaps modelled by them was an image of a mean, judgmental and vindictive God, concluding that there must be something wrong with you simply make good sense.

And the only way that that attitude is going to shift is if you begin to see God in a different way. Joel begins to nudge the people towards that new way of seeing God with this pledge and promise, **“You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.”**

So that is Joel’s first response to everything that the people are dealing with – he begins to instruct them on who God actually is. But he is not done. Obviously, the people are going to need something more in order to recover from the emotional and physical blow that the locusts have dealt them. And so Joel gives them another remarkable but somewhat unexpected promise. **“Then afterwards,”** God promises – after you have recovered from this terrible devastation – **“I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.”**

And that seems like a great promise. Just like God has poured out the rain that has brought the new growth, he is going to pour out his Spirit on all

of his people. He is going to guide them directly and show them how to live with the ups and downs of life. But if you know anything about the history of prophecy and the movements of the Spirit, you will know that there might be something there to be a little bit concerned about. When God speaks; when the Spirit of God moves powerfully in individuals, it does tend to upset things.

From very early on, the church became very nervous about the movement of the Holy Spirit among the members of the church. It tended to be very disruptive. The Spirit often said things that the leadership didn't really want to hear. And so, some Christian churches decided to shut that kind of thing down. Reformed churches like our own, for example, taught that the Holy Spirit basically stopped speaking to people once the scriptures had all been written. Other churches, like for example the Roman Catholic, were okay with the idea that the Spirit still spoke, but declared that the Spirit only spoke to those who were already established as leaders of the church.

So in difficult times, like in the aftermath of a locust swarm, the tendency is to clamp down, get everything back to normal as quickly as possible. What you don't want is some new message from God that is going to shake things up and so if anyone is going to receive a message from the Spirit, you would rather that it be someone who isn't going to shake up the *status quo*. You want the Spirit to speak only to established people, the elders, the old people who will be slow to embrace change when they receive a message from God's Spirit.

Isn't it rather interesting, therefore, that Joel promises the very opposite in his prophecy? The Spirit, he says, will be poured out all willy-nilly. It will be poured on the old but also on the young. It will be poured out on the sons but also on the daughters. Most shocking of all, Joel proclaims that God's Spirit will be given even to the slaves, even to those who are least interested in keeping things the way they have always been.

There seems no doubt in what Joel is saying. After the locust swarm has passed, we will be not just going back to the way things used to be. We are meant to be inspired by God to seek out new directions, new messages and new beginnings and we are especially called to listen to what God might be saying through the youth and through those who have traditionally been cut off from power and influence.

I believe that in the church today, we are in a kind of post locust swarm situation. The church has been shocked in recent years to find itself in a world where the old assumptions and the old ways of doing things just don't work the way that they once did. It used to be that we could just plant a few seeds, open the doors and expect near instant growth to occur. The last few decades, therefore, have felt a bit like the aftermath of a locust swarm for many churches. That's why I think that Joel's message is very relevant to us today.

We need to be reminded, first of all, that the image we have received of God in many cases – the image of a mean, vindictive God who is out to get us if we just step just a little bit out of line – is false and dangerous. But it also means that we need to be open to the second response that Joel offers: the promise of a new pouring out of God’s Spirit on God’s people.

A couple of weeks ago I used this passage from Joel to begin our session meeting. It was an unusual start to our regular meeting because we had invited our new youth group to join us during that time. So I pointed out to the youth group that the session is made up of a group of people called elders. And what is the meaning of the word *elder*? The word literally means old person. Now, that doesn’t mean that all of our elders here at St. Andrews are senior citizens. But it does mean, to a certain extent, that the members of session have been chosen and elected to be careful and small c conservative leaders of the congregation – people who won’t mess with the *status quo* too much. And Joel speaks of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the elders as they are called to lead God’s people. But, I pointed out, as much as we need the leadership of the elders, they cannot do it alone. God’s Spirit is also poured out upon the youth, Joel says, because they also are anointed to lead us especially at difficult moments when it feels like we’re in the aftermath of a locust swarm and God is urging us to find new ways to be relevant in a world where many things have changed.

That is why I’m so excited today to be celebrating the sacrament of baptism for Lily. Today we welcomed her into the life of this congregation. We heard the promises, made by her parents, that they will tell her about Jesus and give her the opportunity to experience the life of Christ’s Church as she grows up. That is something that is wonderful and that we can all look forward to. But I look forward to even more. We called down the presence of God’s Holy Spirit among us today, symbolically represented in this water. Just as the water was poured out on her head, I know that if only we leave open the possibility, God will pour out his Spirit upon her. That’s why she has been anointed as our leader today. She will lead us out into the world at the end of the service today.

Lily will grow up in a world that we can only imagine at this point. Who knows what changes are coming our way? Who knows how the environment, society and even Canada’s political system will change in years to come? Who knows how the church will need to change? We need new voices to guide us into that future, and God has chosen one such voice today. I know that you will cherish her and her presence in this congregation in years to come. That’s great. The bigger challenge that God lays before you today is will you listen to her and others like her in years to come when the Holy Spirit speaks to them and tells us what incredible new thing God wants to do among us and through us.