

Wild Locusts Can't Stop Us
Joel 2.23-32
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Pentecost +23C
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It's a story to be told, the book begins. It started with little black and red grasshoppers. Adults ignored them as kids scooped them up in jars to better watch them hop around. Grown-ups went about the business of their days while children picked blades of grass to feed their little creatures and poked holes in the lids so the tiny grasshoppers might become pets. It all seemed innocent enough, though one old farmer scratched his head and said he'd never seen insects like those in his entire life. They reminded him of a swarm of wild locusts. And there certainly were a lot of them.

The next day the wild creatures had doubled in size and seemed to have tripled in number. The children were a little afraid to catch the bigger grasshoppers, and the old farmer began to talk to other adults with concern in his voice. The patch of grass along the side of his house was completely chewed down to the soil. If the insects reached the fields, then people were going to be in some real trouble. Parents pulled their kids inside as a group of men mixed up a spray to deter the rapidly multiplying pests from spreading. But just as they finished their work, a heavy storm came and washed all of their efforts away.

Surely the rain will drown all of these grasshoppers, people assured themselves. There was still plenty of food and plenty of wine in the cabinets. Nothing to worry about, they told each other. By the third day, people woke up to grasshoppers in their kitchens, and the old farmer sighed deeply and mournfully when he looked out into the youngest field he'd planted just weeks before. Every single shoot of wheat was eaten flat down like they'd been cut with a knife. An entire harvest ruined in one night. The grasshoppers were big now with gold and green bodies and bright red wings. Leaders of the community gathered fretfully to plan what they could do to minimize the devastation while others drank and played and ignored the looming disaster.

The infestation was the worst anyone had ever seen and worse than even the oldest man and woman could remember. Months passed, and the community leaders gathered again to review food supplies that remained. If they shared what they had, then everyone could make it until the next planting and harvest. That also gave them enough time to focus on a few fields to protect the most. Every day men experimented with potions and sprays to chase the grasshoppers away, but nothing worked.

Meanwhile, women worked together stitching a screen to protect a field so that a little grain might grow. But their plans weren't enough, and the grasshoppers grew larger and infiltrated everything.

The people watched as the storehouse supplies dwindled, the grain failed, the animals groaned with hunger because there was no pasture for them. Even the flocks of sheep walked around dazed. Some of the wealthier members of town had private supplies of food and were less concerned about the long-term effects of what was happening. Pethuel's son Joel was already wringing his hands and distraught at the loss and need around him. When he found out about the secret supplies certain neighbors were holding onto, that was enough for him to finally speak up. He called for the entire community to gather:

Listen up everyone. Nothing like this has ever happened in anyone's memory or even in the days of our ancestors. We are years into the infestation now and have tried every trick we can think of to deal with this destruction ourselves. We have forgotten something important. Think about it with me. What story will we tell our children about this? And what will they tell their children and the generation beyond that?

What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. What the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. Wake up! Some of you are still waiting out the destruction and despair because your own pantry is still stocked with wine. Look around at your neighbors! Look at the loss and the tragedy that is everywhere around you! It is time to step outside of your own house and lament what is happening! Wake up to how significant the destruction and loss is! Wake up to how your neighbors are going to bed hungry at night and waking up hungrier the next day!

Here's what we're going to do. We're going to sanctify this fast. We're going to call this hunger holy. We're going to gather every single person from the entire community together and cry out to our God because God is crying out to us. How haven't we realized it until now? God is with us in this hunger and devastation and loss. God is near to us in our suffering. We have forgotten. We have forgotten that our lives are a gift. We have forgotten that God is present with us in the land that's in front of our eyes every single day and in the voices of our neighbors who are asking for help. We do not remember who we are or who God is.

God is calling out saying, "Return to me...rend your hearts and not your clothing." We have been going about this all wrong with every effort and plan we can dream up. We've mixed sprays and stitched ground covers and rotated fields. We have rationed

grain and stretched what little we have. And yet, in all these years, we have never asked God for help. Friends it is time to return to the Lord. Do you remember? We used to tell the story: God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. We have forgotten. We let years go by with all of this trying and fretting and pretending everything would suddenly change. We thought we were strong enough and smart enough to fix all of our problems on our own. Let's turn this around.

The people listened, and Joel went to work directing trumpet and priests and people. He blessed their fast and blessed the people gathered—the elderly, the children, the nursing babies, the newly married—everyone gathered and everyone was rededicated to the ways of God as the people of God. And God listened and had pity for the people. God remembered them. Then the Lord spoke these promises to the community: I am sending grain and wine and oil for you. I will meet your needs. I am chasing out this devastating army that has attacked you for years. But God didn't stop there. God spoke to the soil and to the animals: Do not fear. Be glad and rejoice! God blessed the creation again. And for everyone who had called out to God together, the Lord sent an early rain to restore the land and the animals and the people. God made it green again and lush again and productive again.

But God didn't stop there, either. The people and forgotten God until Joel called the community to remember, and that means the people had forgotten the image of God in them. And the people had forgotten to tell the story of God to their children and their children's children and their children's children's children. After the soil was restored and the animals blessed and the people satisfied, God sent another word to Joel that the power of God's Spirit would be on the people to prophesy and dream dreams and see visions. Young and old, male and female, imprisoned and free, every single person would receive the power of God's spirit to tell the story of who God is and what God has done.

What story will we tell our children about all of this? And what will they tell their children and the generation beyond that? What story is worth being told and retold.¹

Sit with all of this resting in front of you this morning. The locusts, the loss, the efforts at trying to fix it all yourself. You know that feeling of "trying to"...the compulsion of giving all of your effort and a lot of anxiety to something that feels beyond you. The thing you have tried and tried to eliminate but chases you and terrorizes you. The thing you want removed from your life that has followed and haunted you for years. As a people, it's the fear, the devastation, the crying out of neighbors and even animals and

¹ see James Limburg *Interpretation: Hosea-Micah*, pp. 55ff

earth itself. The war and suffering and violence across the globe. The division, the arguing, the disdain that permeates our culture. The forgetting, the ignoring, the pretending loss and suffering is far off, isn't as bad as folks are making it out to be, isn't yours to address, isn't connected to your reality in any significant way.

Hold all of that tenderly in your hands for just a moment in a holy way. Welcome God into the story. Remember who you are shaped and created to be. Remember your truest and best self. Remember who we as a people are shaped and created to be. Remember that God wants to move and create in our midst. Remember that God has sent the power of God's Spirit to rest on you. Welcome God into our presence here to repair what is broken, to guide us toward being healers and repairers with God.

And in the tender holiness of this moment, release the anxiety, release the "trying to", release the blinders preventing you from seeing the world as it is. Release the untrue stories you have told and retold, and return to the story of God—the story that empowers you, calls you beloved, equips you for facing the world before you. Welcome God's presence and mystery. Welcome God's power to heal and restore. Welcome God's vision that invites you to see the world as it should be. In this holy moment, welcome God's invitation to finish the story together. Amen.