

### First Locusts, Then Spirit

In the Wednesday evening Bible Study this past week, Vern Zielke told the class about a huge infestation of grasshoppers that had invaded his family's farm many years ago. It wasn't as bad as the great grasshopper plague of 1874. But like that invasion, this one happened during a drought. Vern tells me that the grasshoppers managed to destroy fully one half of his father's wheat crop. There was barely enough left to harvest, sell, and pay off their expenses. Then the next year, around harvest time, the grasshoppers came again! Apparently these grasshoppers tend to just come and go in Western Kansas, with no explanation. Or . . . is there an explanation? Is there . . . a divine explanation?

In approximately 515 BCE, the Israelites were released from their bondage in Babylon. Not all of them, but a remnant left Babylon and returned to their homeland in Palestine. They had high hopes: of rebuilding their temple, of resettling their towns, and perhaps most immediately important, of replanting their crops, so they would have something to live on.

At some point during their resettlement, a mighty locust plague had descended upon them, which devoured not just part but all of their crops, including grain, and grapes, and olives. Without these three crops, their sacred ritual of offering sacrifices in the temple was no longer possible. The net effect of this plague of locusts was both devastation and disorientation.

The prophet Joel thought he saw Yahweh's hand in this plague. Was this Yahweh's way of getting their attention, perhaps even punishing them for their recent unfaithfulness? Joel doesn't spell out why he thought Yahweh was punishing them, or in what ways they had been unfaithful. So we can only guess. But if they were at all like us, perhaps they had become so preoccupied with their rebuilding and resettling and replanting that they had completely forgotten about God. Or in other words, they had in fact turned away from their God.

We've been having a lot of earthquakes in Kansas recently. A recent newspaper article said that these earthquakes have been caused by the practice of injecting waste water into the substructure of the earth. Maybe. But could they also be God's way of getting our attention?

Meanwhile there have been significant disasters in other parts of the U.S. Wildfires in California. Rare tornadoes in the Pacific Northwest. Hurricane Matthew in Florida and the Carolinas. (And of course Haiti. But right now I'm talking just about the United States.) What's going on here? Is God trying to get our attention?

I guess that depends on how we think about God. Is God responsible for both the bad and the good in our lives, or just the good? Does God punish us for our unfaithfulness, or merely leave us to suffer our own consequences? Does God cause natural disasters, whether flood or fire or hurricane or tornado or a plague of locusts?

Let's stay with our story for just a bit longer. After pondering the locust plague and the devastation it caused, Joel said this to his people:

*"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? 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. Wake up, you drunkards, and weep; wail, all you wine-drinkers, over the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails . . . Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. . . . 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. Alas! For the day of the Lord is near.”*

Wow! Sounds pretty scary!

Turns out the Israelites had already been warned about the Day of the Lord by other Old Testament prophets, including Amos, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Zephaniah. Apparently it would be heralded by signs in the heavens and on the earth. (Hmm. Do tornadoes and earthquakes count? What about meteor showers? We had one recently.) My Bible dictionary says The Day of the Lord would be a time of “decisive visitation [by] Yahweh, when he intervenes to punish the wicked.” If the plague of locusts was any indication—or warning—there must have been a lot of wicked in Israel and Judah.

But I haven’t told you the whole story. According to the prophets, including Joel, the Day of the Lord would also be a day of deliverance, forgiveness, redemption, salvation. A day when, as Joel says, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Which pretty much throws the doors to God’s kingdom wide open.

Prior to this, Joel says, the Lord will pour out his spirit on all flesh: sons and daughters, old and young, even on the male and female slaves! Again we see that God’s grace is wide!

In the Old Testament God’s spirit was believed to be a spirit of power, and strength, and courage, enabling mighty and wondrous works. God poured his spirit out on such people as Moses, Deborah, Gideon, Abigail. The list could go on. And it would include of course Mary, and John the Baptist, and Jesus.

I firmly believe that God has poured out her spirit of power and courage upon this church. How else would we explain the ministries we’ve had throughout our history, including such new ministries as Beyond Tolerance, and Family Promise, and the International Rescue Commission?

I believe that Yahweh has poured out his spirit of liberation and joy upon Linda Gebert and Catherine Balbierz (otherwise known fondly to us as CB), who have waited 30 years to make the formal covenant they will be making today—a covenant with one another, and with God.

I believe God has poured out his spirit upon Katie Funk Wiebe and Marjorie Krause, who have lived such rich and fruitful lives, and whose final liberation is at long last close at hand. (In wbeen liberated. She died at 12:10 this morning. May God’s spirit be upon Susan, and the rest of her family.)

It appears from this morning’s passage that, throughout our life with God, salvation comes in stages. It always begins with repentance. Which simply means turning around. Turning away from those sins which distract us; turning toward the One who is the source of our life, and our reason for living. Salvation begins, perhaps, with locusts, with experiences that humble us, bring us to our knees; remind us who we are, remind us of our need for God. But salvation continues with Spirit, God’s spirit, God with us, God’s power given to us.

Children of Zion—or shall I say, children of Menno ☺—be glad and rejoice in the Lord our God, for she has given the early rain for our vindication. And in due time, in God’s time, the threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. We shall all eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord our God, who has dealt wondrously with us, who makes all things new. Amen.