

**“Returning from Locusts”**  
**Joel 2:12-19**

“The word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel” (Jl 1:1). That’s how the book we heard from begins. And there’s not a whole lot of information there. Many times, God’s prophets begin with a king’s name and some historical notes, which help us date the time of writing (cf. Is 1:1; Jer 1:1-3; Hos 1:1). But we get no such thing with Joel. One finds a single mention of a place name that shares the name of a king (Jl 3:2), but nothing that definitively pinpoints when Joel wrote. Some scholars date it a century before the Assyrian invasion; others, a century after the Babylonian return: a span of 400 years. Who knows when or to who Joel was immediately writing... but maybe that’s deliberate ambiguity. Maybe Joel made that choice. Maybe these words aren’t to be dismissed simply because “they were written by someone in the past about the past for people in the past.” Maybe Joel was intentionally nondescript so that whoever heard his words might think, “Wow, it sounds like God’s prophet wrote this yesterday.” Maybe you’re supposed to wonder, “is this about me?” Well, I can tell you that it is about you, and it calls you—along with the rest of the world—to repent and “Return to the Lord your God.”

Joel has a thing with bugs; namely, locusts. And locusts have been known to breed so quickly and swarm to such a degree that they cause *humans* to migrate after destroying all agriculture. Joel paints this picture early in his prophecy when he writes, “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. ...The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes” (Jl 1:4, 10). This is utter destruction. In a time when we easily transport provision across oceans and preserve food for months on end, we lose sight that this kind of loss would put an ancient civilization on the brink of extinction. It’s destruction not only of basic sustenance, but of those things used in worship: grain, wine, and oil (cf. Ex 29:38-46; Lev 2). And the fact that “the ground mourns” isn’t just a poetic flourish, but a nod to the persistent reality of sin, for God said to Adam, “cursed is the ground because of you” (Ge 3:17). Joel’s a really unique prophet in this sense: he never cites any specific sins. You can go through the other prophetic books and find concrete examples where Israel went awry, whether it’s idolatry, oppressing the poor, gratuitous self-indulgence, etc.; but Joel includes none of that. It’s as if he knows that the people know that they’ve done wrong... and now it’s up to them to come clean. He puts the onus on them to take a true assessment of themselves, and those who won’t will have a rough go of it, because they’ve neglected repentance. We all wanna think of ourselves as pretty good... or at least, better than the people we hear about day-in and day-out. And compared to other people before the judgement of *men* you may be right—you may be much better. But compared to other people before the judgment of *God*, everyone is the same, and that’s a hard thing to admit when the judgement of men gives you an opening to feel good about yourself. Joel warns you to take a real self-assessment and not hold back, because as St. Paul writes, “if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged” (1 Cor 11:31).

If we neglect repentance, thankfully, there are locusts... which at first doesn’t seem like anything to be thankful for. But they’re “sent among you” (Jl 2:25) to draw you to repentance. Locusts aren’t sent casually—they’re sent to destroy what people pin their hopes on outside of God, to destroy those

things that ultimately fail. They're sent to expose the things that people trust in more than God. It may be money; it may be a relationship; it may be a political party; or it may even be something as simple as a dream. If your final hope is in these things, either these things need to be destroyed or you will be; and so God sends locusts. Sometimes the Lord has to break you down so you'll admit sin. Without the admission of sin, the Lord remains distant. He simply doesn't wanna deal with the self-righteous, the proud, or the secure. Who He wants to deal with are the unrighteous, the humble, and the broken, because He only sanctifies *the sinner* and He only justifies *the ungodly* (Rom 4:5). God sends locusts because our sinful nature needs a bit of destruction. Some might say, "Well, God told me what to do in His word... that should be enough! Why does He need to resort to sending locusts?!" I think that answer is obvious: we have a really hard time following His word. That's why when children continue to commit the same wrong even though you've told them over and over again not to do it, you're compelled to add a measure of discipline. Joel warns you to watch where you pin your hopes, and if locusts come, he exhorts you to "rend your hearts."

Because God promises to restore, for "he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster." He's a jealous God who has pity, which means He wants you, and He wants nothing else to have you—He wants you to know holiness unto life with Him. He's not going to ruin you. He's not going to forsake you. The cross of Christ says this loud and clear, because there divine blood was shed for you! And now He instills in you a proper worship beginning with the admission of sin. We are to "call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants," because upon the admission of sin God sanctifies and justifies, restoring you to Him, and saying, "Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations." There's never a bad time to repent. And yet there is a good time to focus on repentance. The good time is now, this Lent, as we approach the death of our Lord and Savior. "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster." Amen.

—Pastor Greg Bauch