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The Years the Locust Ate

a sermon on Joel 2.18-27

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Before I read the text of scripture this morning, let me set the stage, so that you understand what's happening. Our reading is from the tiny book of Joel, just three chapters. It's only four pages in my Bible. Joel is one of the minor prophets. We call them minor, not because they were less important than the others, but only because the writings they left behind are shorter.

Joel's book may be short, but it is important. The very first Christian sermon ever was preached from the book of Joel: Peter's sermon at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit fell upon the believers gathered in prayer. They began to speak in different languages they had never studied. They ran out into the streets and began telling people that Jesus, the Messiah, had been raised from the dead. The people of Jerusalem wanted to know what in the world was going on. Peter stood up and said, "This is exactly what the prophet Joel said would happen."

Joel lived sometime between 500 and 350 years before Jesus. That's about as close as we can pin him down. This makes him one of the last of the great prophets. Obviously he spoke God's Word to the people of his day. God was dealing with them, and Joel spoke about the things that were happening to them. Yet the book Joel left us has a timeless quality. You really don't need much historical background to understand it. The book more or less explains itself. And, because it is the Word of God, it speaks to us in our time and place – if we take care to hear what God has to say to us.

Here is why God sent Joel: God's people were suffering. Their land had been devastated by a ravenous horde of locusts. Joel compares them to a mighty army. The locusts came through and stripped bare every shred of vegetation. Keep in mind that back then people lived close to the land. They were mostly farmers, and when the crops got wiped out, they didn't just face hard times that called for a little belt tightening. They faced starvation and death. As always in these cases, children and the elderly died in disproportionate numbers. Without feed, their livestock also died. The loss of their animals meant the economic impact would be felt for generations.

But that was not the worst of it. After the locusts had eaten their livelihoods, the land began a slow recovery. New crops were just beginning to sprout out of the ground.

Hope sprang up with the little green shoots. Perhaps the suffering and dying were about to be over. Then a drought hit. The little shoots died, and hope died with it.

Into this hopeless situation, God sent the prophet Joel. You might expect he would come with good news. The people needed hope. Surely God's prophet would lift their spirits and see them through this terrible nightmare.

You might expect that, but you would be wrong. Joel came saying, "You ain't seen nothin' yet! You think the locusts were bad? You think the drought was bad? That's just the warm up act! God's wrath is about to fall!" Joel preached two main themes: the Day of the Lord and repentance. The Day of the Lord would be a day of judgment. God's people knew that. In the old days they had smugly assumed it would be judgment for the other nations and happy revenge for them. Not so said the prophets, and Joel hit that note hard. "The Day of the Lord is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!" [2.1-2]

There is a curious thing and a surprising thing about Joel's message. The curious thing is, he never specifies what sin or sins God's people had committed that had stirred up God's wrath in the first place. Maybe he assumed it was obvious. Maybe he said it, but that part never made it into the book. A few clues suggest the sin was idolatry. Once again, God's people had forgotten God and started worshipping the idols of other nations. The surprising thing is how the people responded. They didn't get angry, as God's people often had at a prophet with a message they didn't like. Instead, they listened, and they repented. Joel told them to repent, that it may not be too late, and they seized the offer. They repented, and Joel's message changed. Our scripture reading begins with God's response to their repentance. Hear now the witness to our Lord from the prophet Joel. [Read Joel 2.18-27]

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I remember hearing two women talk one day, a long time ago. I don't remember much of their conversation. It was about a mutual friend whose life had turned around. In her younger days this friend had made a lot of poor choices. Her poor choices led to hard times. Poor choices have a way of doing that. She suffered through broken relationships, bad jobs, and feeling desperately alone. Then she did what God's people did in the time of Joel. She repented. She began making different choices, began trying to honor God with her life. I don't want to make you think I am naïve by suggesting that trying hard to live the Christian life always leads to good times and happiness. We all know that sometimes God calls us to hardship and suffering, and this is not always a bad thing. We live for God because we love God, because he has loved us. We don't do it to get rich or find happiness. Nevertheless, this woman's life changed. God blessed her with much better circumstances—I don't recall the details. What I do recall, and it is the reason the whole thing stuck in my head, was a comment the woman hearing this story made. She said, "God is restoring the years the locusts ate."

The years the locusts ate: that lingered in the back of my mind. I knew it was from the Bible, but I did not remember exactly where. I looked it up and found this Joel passage, and it became one more piece of the puzzle for understanding God's ways. Not that God is a puzzle to be figured out. God is a person, and he is to be loved. We have a relationship with him through Christ. God's ways, though, are tough to figure out. On the plus side, you don't have to understand, you only have to trust. God takes care of the rest. Part of loving God, however, is reflecting on his goodness, and restoring the years the locusts ate seems exactly like something God would do. It fits with everything I know of God from scripture and from my own experience.

Do you know what is the hardest thing for God to do? Maybe you assume everything is easy for God, but I'm not so sure. Creation was easy. New creation will be easy. God is God, after all. Nothing is too difficult for God, but one thing is difficult: Getting his people's hearts in the right place. We can be so stubborn, irrational, and self-destructive. I say all this because I suspect God sent locusts and a drought only because nothing less would get his people's attention. Perhaps he tried other methods, probably he just knew. He sent the locusts, the drought, and a fire and brimstone prophet; but all of it was done out of love. God wanted his people to know him and to experience his blessings. He was delighted with their repentance. And he responded by promising to restore them. He could have said, "OK, no more locusts. No more droughts. Put all that behind you and move on." But he didn't. He promised, "I will restore to you the years the locust has eaten." What a beautiful picture of God's generous grace! It is not enough for God to pick us up and move on. He doesn't forget what was lost. He gives it back.

This is so encouraging, especially for someone who lives with regret. I think, for example, of the actress Patricia Neal. You have to be a certain age to remember her. She was famous for her work in the 40s, 50s, and 60s – and for coming back from a stroke. She died a couple of months ago at age 84. Back in 1949 she starred in the film *The Fountainhead* with actor Gary Cooper. They fell in love. That's an occupational hazard in their profession, I suppose; but it was also unfortunate because Cooper was married. They had an affair that lasted three years. During the course of the affair she became pregnant. Abortion was not legal back then, but it was possible. Copper pressured her, and she was afraid of what having a child out of wedlock would do to her acting career. By the way, how times have changed. Can you imagine an actress worrying about something like that today? Yet another illustration of the overall moral decline of our society. Anyway, she had an abortion.

In her 1983 autobiography, Neal wrote this: "For over thirty years, alone, in the night, I cried. For years and years I cried over that baby. And whenever I had too much to drink, I would remember that I had not allowed him to exist. I admired Ingrid Bergman for having her son. She had guts. I did not. And I regret it with all my heart. If I had only one thing to do over in my life, I would have that baby." Neal became a Christian

at some point. She was forgiven, but she lived with a lot of regret. I wonder what it might mean for God to restore the years the locusts ate in her life. What would that look like? How would he do it? How could he take her brokenness and make something beautiful out of it? I don't know, but I am convinced God knows a way.

God is in the business of redeeming broken people – sinners. Redeeming us means forgiving us and giving us a future, but I believe it also means restoring our past. He doesn't go back in time and change what happened, and of course, our sins have consequences. We have to live with consequences that can be bitterly painful. Yet even though God doesn't change what happened, he redeems it somehow. I wonder what Joel would have said to Patricia Neal.

I wonder what he would say to you and me. We all have regrets. We've all made messes. We have all hurt people we love. We've hurt ourselves. Some of us more than others, surely; but all of us to one degree or another. What does Joel say to us? What would it mean for God to restore the years the locusts ate?

I'm not smart enough to answer that, I'm afraid. I do think a lot of it happens on the other side of death. In eternity, in heaven, God makes us beautiful. He makes the suffering we have endured worthwhile. I believe this is true of both righteous suffering and the suffering we bring on ourselves through our sin. Righteous suffering would be like the beatings and prison the apostle Paul got because he preached Jesus. After Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul was blind. Jesus sent Ananias to heal him. At first, Ananias didn't want to go. He knew how Paul persecuted Christians. He was afraid of Paul. Jesus told Ananias to go, because Jesus had selected Paul to preach the gospel to the gentiles. Paul would suffer much for the sake of Christ. That's righteous suffering, and God puts that right in heaven. I promise you Paul has never regretted it for a moment. Even in life he didn't, according to his letters.

Paul did regret persecuting the church, however. Do you think the chance to preach the gospel and start churches and see people come to faith in Christ was how God restored the years the locusts had eaten in Paul's life? I think so. Paul was crushed when he realized what he had done. How could it be restored? Through his ministry as an apostle.

So you see, often God restores what we have lost only in heaven. At times, however, he restores it, in a way, here and now. I think of a friend who was a crack addict, and now he is a pastor. I think of many people who were once atheists. Some of them attacked the Christian faith. But now they work to show people the truth of the gospel. Alister McGrath is a world-renowned theologian, and rightly so. He was an atheist in his youth. He came to faith in Christ while in college, and his life has been spent explaining and defending the Christian faith. Lee Strobel was an atheist. When he came to Christ he used his skills as a journalist to write several books defending the

Christian faith. I have another friend who is a lot like him. He too was a journalist and atheist. Now he is a pastor.

Perhaps I can explain what I am trying to say this way: A father decided he ought to impress on his son the danger of sin, so he got a hammer and nails and took the boy out to a fencepost in the yard. "Hammer these nails into this fencepost," the father instructed his son. The son did so. "The fencepost is your life. The nails are sins," he explained as he began to pull each nail out. When all the nails were out he said, "God forgives your sin, but see these holes? The consequences remain." I believe that's true. It is a helpful illustration. I would only add one thing: God is able to make the fencepost beautiful. It is scarred. It's full of holes. But somehow God makes it good and clean and beautiful—certainly in heaven, often in this life. He at least begins his work in us on this side of death. Sometimes he restores what the locust ate, here and now, and we praise him for it.

What does it mean for God to restore the years the locusts have eaten? I cannot explain it better than I have. I can't tell you what it might look like in your life, or even in mine. I only know that when God redeems, he doesn't do a halfway job. He will make your life beautiful. Nothing you have done and nothing you have suffered is beyond God's power to redeem. That's a tremendous comfort to me. It should be to you. Of course, it all happens through Christ. His death and resurrection make our redemption possible. His resurrection, in fact, is the pattern for ours. What the Father did for the Son, he will do for us: raise us to eternal life. And through his Spirit, we get a foretaste of resurrection here and now. We taste it in worship and in the fellowship of the church. We taste it in healing and strength and faith and joy and peace. We taste it in our relationship with Christ. Resurrection power working in us. ...

Now, I am almost finished. I am not going to ask "So what?" this week. This sermon is about the goodness of God, and all I want you to do is love him. And take comfort in his generous grace. God said something through Joel, however, in our text. I would be a poor preacher if I overlooked it. Right at the end of our reading, God explained why. He explained why he sent the locusts and the drought, why he had sent Joel, and why he was so generously redeeming his people who repented.

"You shall know ... that I am in the midst of Israel ... and that I, the Lord, am your God ... and there is no other." This is also why he sent Jesus, why he established the church, and it is why you are sitting here this morning. God wants you to know, and through the church he wants the whole world to know that he is with us, that he is God, and there is no other.

The most precious gift God gives us is himself. To know him is the most awesome experience a human being can have. It is the only thing that fulfills you and makes you complete. God wants you to have the joy of a relationship with him. He wants it so

much, Jesus was willing to die for you. Some of us resist. We think we can find our own way. We spurn his love. Sometimes, in his grace, God sends locusts to get our attention. If he does, it is only because he loves us. His desire is to save you. When he does, he not only gives you a better present and future, he also redeems your past. He takes your life, your whole life, and makes it beautiful. Only God can do that.

Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us, that we might be called the children of God. Amen.

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