

Second Sunday of Advent - Turn to a Merciful God

December 4, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Luke 11:13 ; Joel 2: 12-13; 28-29

Grace and peace from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

I remember one particular summer when the 17 year cicadas emerged. These large, hard, flying bugs were everywhere. It was like a low budget horror movie. They ran into any part of you. You couldn't drive without them striking your windshield regularly. They clung to screens and were incessantly loud. They were icky and a nuisance. But they weren't anything like the swarms of locust Joel and his contemporaries experienced.

According to National Geographic, "locust are related to the grasshopper. However, locust behavior can be something else entirely. Locusts are sometimes solitary insects with lifestyles much like grasshoppers. But locusts have another behavioral phase called the gregarious phase. When environmental conditions produce many green plants and promote breeding, locusts can congregate into thick, mobile, ravenous swarms." These swarms can "devastate crops and cause major agricultural damage that leads to famine and starvation. The desert locust is notorious and found in some 60 countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. A desert locust swarm can be 460 square miles in size — 15 times the area of Disney World, packing between 40 and 80 million locusts into less than half a square mile. Each locust can eat its weight in plants every 24 hours, so a swarm of such size would eat 423 million pounds of plants every day. [Even today] Desert locust plagues may threaten the economic livelihood of one-tenth of the world's population. ⁱ

The crisis that precipitated Joel's prophecy which we heard this morning was just such an invasion of locust. It was devastating the land, livestock and population. Some biblical scholars think the locust is a metaphor for the different armies that had invaded and conquered Israel and Judah. Whether locust, foreign armies or both, the Hebrew people faced the same question — when the swarming ended, what would be left and how could they recover?

"Yet even now, says the LORD" Right now in the middle of all the desolation, uncertainties and fear, "even now" turn to the LORD who is present, available, approachable. The prophecy does not begin with an overarching "what's next," but instead a call to open our hearts to God and worship. Turn to the Lord with "fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." Return to the Lord with all your grief, angers and fears. Bring to God not torn garments ---- a traditional act of grief or repentance — but your broken heart. The prophet doesn't tell the people to suck it up and get on with it. Our Lord who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, [and] relents from punishing." can be trusted with our problem and hearts in any situation. Which is why the prophets always call us back to be people who keep God in the center of life and living.

There are plenty of swarming locust around and in us that test our faith and pull our eyes from God There is a restlessness and uneasiness in our nation. There are wildfires and once again, violence on a college campus. We have members of our church who are battling chronic pain, uncooperative muscles and joints, progressive illnesses, grief and doubts. Over the last ten years Haven has changed in small and almost imperceptible ways that we don't fully understand yet. You may have other examples of circumstances that have the disruptive or damaging power of swarming locust. Into the buzzing of those swarms we hear, "Yet even now, says the Lord," turn and return to me with all your aching and straining hearts. It is not the end, despite what you may feel. The grace, mercy and love of the Lord, your God is more powerful than whatever is swarming. Return. Turn. Return. Turn to the One who can and will carry us through storms, changes and unknowns. The swarming locust will not destroy us — be it poor health, loss of a loved one, political unrest, or just not knowing what is next.

"Then afterward," Joel proclaims for the Lord. *Then after* the swarming locust, the devastation, and the strength and power of God to carry us through, the Lord promises to "pour out God's Spirit upon all flesh." "Despite suffering, despite sin or other

circumstances, the Lord says with great clarity that God will remain active and accessible.”² Into those broken hearts and areas harmed by locust, the Lord promises to send the Holy Spirit to show us the way. The Spirit of the Lord will not be sent to just a few or specially trained persons. God’s spirit will be poured to both men and women, young and old, poor and rich. They will speak God’s Word, “dream God-honoring dreams,” see visions of what is possible and life-giving. “Joel gives us God’s promise – the power of the Holy Spirit will be ours,”² even and especially in the wake of troubles, even and especially poured out on the unlikely — like the very young or the elderly, the unexpected or ignored, or you or me. The dreams and visions that God will set loose will not simply be for our personal enjoyment but to advance the Lord’s kingdom ways on earth.

How we are in need of God’s visions and dreams! Into “the way it has always been.. into “what we usually do” and “what the heck is going on,” we need old and young women and men who will say, “I wonder what might happen if “ as they speak aloud the wild and wonderful ideas the Spirit has set loose in them. We need God’s youthful dreams who just don’t see why God’s will can’t be done. We need our elder’s who are beyond worrying about appearances or perfection to help us find God’s ways forward. When we let swarming complacency or anxiety cause us to wring our hand and get stuck, we need God’s visionaries and dreamers to wake us up and help us see differently, help us imagine what future God may have in store for us. Here, right here among us God is pouring out God’ Spirit. Who among us will speak God’s dream and cast gospel visions? Whoever you are, we need to hear what the Spirit of God has placed in your heart and imagination. Please speak.

Most certainly many of us, our region, our church and nation have challenges. Most “have experienced more than their share of loss and change in the past years. But according to the prophecies of Joel, that’s just the time when God is likely to do something truly amazing.”³ Remember --- It was in a time of Roman oppression, in a lowly stable, to a

a young woman and a man who had no particular status or means, that Jesus, God-in-flesh, was born. And his birth said “Even now, said the Lord,” I come to be with and among and for you, to show you again that I am gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” The government and religious rulers would put Jesus to death as most of his followers fled. “*Then afterwards*” Jesus was raised from the dead and the Holy Spirit was poured upon ordinary men and women who went on to proclaim the gospel vision and carry on Christ’s kingdom-dream. Hear the call of Advent --- return and turn to the Lord, Keep your eyes on Christ this swarming time of year. Turn and return to the Lord who is more powerful and determined than any locust. Turn and return to the Lord and expect the Spirit of the Lord to be poured on and into you. Return and turn to the Lord. And instead of sugar plums, let God’s dreams and visions dance in our heads, stoke our hearts with hope and be set the gospel free in what we do and say. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 12/3/16

ENDNOTES

i. <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/bugs/locust/>

2. Paraphrase from Harvard Stephens’ sermon, “In the World for Good, September 27, 1998 posted on day1.org

2. Quotations in this paragraph are from Bruce Hedgepeth, “Seeing Visions, Dreaming Dreams” June 12, 2011 as posted at <http://www.churchofthepalms.org/newsletters/Sermon%20Text/6-12-11ST.pdf>

3. Bruce Hedgepeth, “Seeing Visions, Dreaming Dreams” June 12, 2011 as posted at <http://www.churchofthepalms.org/newsletters/Sermon%20Text/6-12-11ST.pdf>