

## Ash Wednesday “A Call to Return” Joel 2:13

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to You , O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In our OT reading, Joel’s prophecy is dark and terrifying, and the imagery is vivid. It sets the stage for God’s invitation and promise: “You have turned away from Me in your hearts and minds, and I have now shown you where that path will take you. But it is not too late. Turn back! Return to the Lord! I am gracious and merciful, and I will bless you.”

Shockingly, perhaps, the path to the blessing is equally as dark and terrifying, and the imagery even more vivid, than the path to destruction. God’s call to return is a call to join Jesus on a path of pain and suffering. But it is a path that leads to everything *but* destruction; it leads to blessings from God and the gift of eternal life in Christ. God calls us into relationships with Him and with other Christians, people who walk the path with us and share their blessings. This sets the stage for the Lenten path that we will follow together, a path where we learn from our brothers and sisters in the faith, and where their stories help to illuminate and direct our own stories.

“Return to the Lord your God!”

This is the drumbeat of our Lenten worship series this year: “Return!”

We hear God calling out to us: “Return to Prayer”; “Return from Betrayal”; “Return from False Witness”; “Return from Denial”; “Return to the Kingdom of God”; “Return to the Table”; “Return to Truth”; “Return to the Church”; “Return and See” what God has done for you.

And so, as we launch this series, we gather together first to hear Joel’s prophecy and God’s invitation. Our Old Testament Reading from Joel gets us oriented to the season, highlights the problem, and lays out the solution in all its beauty and simplicity. God calls us to simply return to Him, because He will address our needs and provide for our salvation.

Our task for today is simple:

First, we will look at Joel's prophecy and the context in which it came. What was going on? How did God's words speak to the situation? And how might that have sounded to the people?

Second, we will think about whether this prophecy applies to us. Are these words only for the Israelites in Joel's day, or do they have something to offer to us as well?

Finally, we'll hear this invitation and promise offered to us and then spend a little time figuring out what to do with it.

Let's begin by doing a little time-traveling to ancient Israel, where we can get some idea of the people to whom Joel was speaking and understand more about what was going on in their world.

We don't know a lot about Joel. He was a prophet, likely ministering in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The book that bears his name is relatively short—only seventy-three verses organized into just three chapters. But it is rich and deep and complex. His jumping-off point is a plague of locusts that had or would strike Israel and that served to foreshadow the coming "Day of the Lord." Whether that plague was literal or figurative is unclear, but Joel's message is straightforward: a day of judgment will come, and he pleads with the people to turn to God so that they would be found righteous on that "great and awesome day" (Joel 2:31).

The outline of Joel's prophecy is simple:

1: There's an invasion of locusts that will destroy all vegetation. Joel calls the people to fast at the temple and then offers a prayer of lament over the coming destruction.

2: If you thought that was bad, there's something even more significant coming: "the day of the LORD is coming; it is near" (Joel 2:1). Joel describes the Lord's army using the imagery of the destroying locusts. He issues a call to return to the Lord, to fast, and to pray at the temple.

3: God responds. First, to the locust plague, offering healing and restoration. Then, on a much bigger scale, God responds in the day of the Lord, giving salvation to those who call on His name and passing judgment on the worldly nations who have played fast and loose with God's chosen people.

Our Reading for today is drawn right out of the center of the book. The imagery of the swarm of locusts has been completed; the comparison to the Lord's army and the Day of the Lord has been made; and the reader is left wondering what can be done.

It's a little like the scene when the rich young man approaches Jesus and asks what good deed he must do to have eternal life. Jesus counsels the young man to sell all of his possessions and give to the poor, presumably to undercut that man's love of money. And the young man goes away sad. Jesus turns to His disciples and explains how difficult it is for someone with wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven. And the disciples "were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?'" (Matthew 19:25).

You almost hear Joel's audience asking the same of him: "Who then can be saved?"

But Joel brings good news; he brings a promise. And it's simple: "It shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (Joel 2:32).

They needed only to return to the Lord their God, "for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and He relents over disaster" (Joel 2:13). They needed only to stop trusting in themselves and to trust in God. They needed only to realize that just as they couldn't stop the swarming locusts, neither would they be able to stop Judgment Day. It will come. All will be affected. And the only solution is to return to the Lord.

But are those words only for the Israelites? Might you be facing a swarm of locusts that threatens to completely destroy you?

You certainly are. There are small, unassuming little things that each do a little bit of damage. But they add up to a destructive force that descends on the landscape and decimates everything good in its path. Your sins are your locusts. And while one little locust doesn't seem all that terrifying, when the entire list of your deeds is considered, it is breathtaking and terrifying. If the "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), and if, as Ezekiel says, "the soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20), then this locust swarm of our sins is frightening indeed.

Joel's words can and should hit us the same way they hit the Israelites. The Day of the Lord will come, and with it, immense destruction and terror. Of ourselves, there is no way to escape it. The times we put ourselves first over our God, our spouse, our brothers and sisters, and our neighbors; when we coveted our neighbor's property; when we spoke ill of our co-workers. When we helped ourselves to the office supplies at work because we figured they owed it to us. And when we thought about or had that little fling; when we lost our tempers and screamed at the guy in the car or on the bike who didn't get out of our way;

when you treated our fathers with contempt or dismissed our mothers' request to clean up our messes; when we blew off worship because we just didn't care to hear what that boring preacher had to say; when we strung together a string of curse words that would make a dockworker blush; when we decided that we knew better than God about . . . well . . . everything. **That's** the swarm of locusts; and destruction of all of the vegetation is the least of our worries. Eternal death and damnation should absolutely terrify us!

Joel brings good news *for us too!* He brings a promise. And it's simple: "It shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (Joel 2:32).

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" (Joel 2:13). In spite of our sinful rejection of God, He invites us to return to Him and promises to bless us. Stop trusting in yourself and look to God. Know that we can't stop the swarming locusts and we cannot stop Judgment Day. It will come. All will be affected. And the only solution is to return to the Lord.

Over the coming weeks, we will explore more deeply how God's call to return plays out in our lives, and we'll do so by walking in the steps of the disciples and those who accompanied Jesus in the final days of His life. We will hear the call to return as it echoes in their ears and maybe come to understand it the way they did. For example, next Wednesday we will spend some time with Peter, James, and John as they accompany Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our theme is "Return to Prayer." Similar themes will follow each week of Lent.

I invite you to be here for each of our midweek services as we follow Joel's call to "gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants" (Joel 2:16). We'll come together and listen to God's call, and we will return to Him, "for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13). He has done everything necessary in Christ Jesus for our salvation.

May the love of God, and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen.