

Plague! Weep and Wail! Lament and Mourn!

Joel 1:1-20; Revelation 9:1-6

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Dear Congregation of Christ: On February 14, 2020, a headline in the British newspaper *Daily Express* read, “End of the world: Coronavirus panic and African locust plague spark Bible apocalypse fears.” In addition to the coronavirus pandemic, a locust swarm is currently ravaging large portions of eastern Africa and the Middle East. These locust armies are described as “unprecedented in size and scope.” According to a U.N. official, a medium-size swarm can eat the same amount of food as the entire population of Kenya, the same amount of food as everyone in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York can eat in one day. Even the *National Geographic*, in its February 2020 issue, reports,

East Africa is in the midst of a crisis that sounds like something out of the Book of Exodus: A plague of locusts is spreading across the region, threatening the food supply of tens of millions... devouring everything in a matter of hours. [It]... is like nothing in recent memory.

In our text today, the prophet Joel describes a locust plague that would devastate the whole land of Judah. He calls for the whole nation to wail and weep, lament and mourn over the destruction, repent of their sins against God, and to pray to God to deliver them.

But first, what do we know about the author of this book, and when and why was it written? First, we know nothing about the prophet Joel, except that his name means “The LORD is God,” and that his father’s name is Pethuel. Second, proposed dates of its writing vary by about 400 years, but the most accepted date is about the early 8th century B.C. before the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel. That period saw peace and prosperity in Israel and Judah.

But as in most cases, this peace and prosperity also meant forgetting to thank and praise God for his blessings, and then a descent into rebellion against his laws: idolatry, sexual immorality, corruption, injustice, and delight in the pleasures of the unbelieving world. Therefore, through the prophet Joel, God called his people to repent of their sins and turn back to him.

Joel uses four of nine different words for locusts in Hebrew. These four words most probably means four successive locust invasions. It could also mean that the devastation was complete in the locusts cutting, swarming, hopping and destroying the fields. Nothing more was left to be eaten (verse 4). The Bible often uses the number 4 to describe total destruction: pestilence, sword, famine and captivity (Jer 2:3; see also Ezk 14:21; see also Rev 9:15). Also, Amos Chapter 1 also lists 4 sins that each of the nations have committed that incurred God’s judgment.

The destruction by locusts is so complete that Joel calls on three groups of people in the nation to mourn, repent and pray. This morning, we will meditate on **Plague! Weep and Wail! Lament and Mourn!** in three points: first, **You Pleasure-Seekers**; second, **You Vineyard Owners**; and third, **You Priests, Elders and Nation**.

You Pleasure-Seekers

As all God's prophets did, Joel begins his prophecy by invoking the authority that God gave him to warn the people, "*The word of the LORD that came to Joel.*" He begins his warning by calling out older men, "*Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?*" This is a rhetorical question since the following verses describe a locust plague that was unparalleled in the nation's history. Therefore, they must tell the next generations about this terrible plague to warn them as well (verses 2-3).

But during his very day of prophesying, Joel begins calling those who have forgotten about God because all they seek were the pleasures of their prosperity. The first group that he calls out are the drunkards, "*Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth*" (verse 5). This first group includes both drunkards or habitual drinkers, and those who enjoy wine but not to get drunk. They must weep and wail, instead of making merry when drinking and enjoying their wine, because there is no more wine on their lips. The locusts have utterly destroyed all the vineyards, and the happiness of these people depended on wine. They must lament and mourn like a girl who has been betrothed to a man, but the man died before the day of the wedding ceremony (verse 8).

Let us be clear about wine. The Bible does not condemn drinking wine. Rather, the Scriptures condemn drunkenness (Prv 23:20; 1 Cor 5:11; Eph 5:18). There is a big difference between the two. Many people enjoy wine with their families and friends without getting drunk. Psalm 104:14 says that God brings forth the fruit of the vine from the ground "*to gladden the heart of man.*" Jesus himself turned water into wine so that wedding guests would enjoy it (John 4). And in the Passover celebration, Jesus and his disciples enjoyed "*the fruit of the vine*" (Matt 26:29).

But there are people who drink with family and friends for the purpose of getting into a stupor. And what are the most common effects of drunkenness? Drunkards lose their physical, mental and emotional stability. They cannot drive or stand or walk straight. They cannot think right. Their emotions are out of control and their usual inhibitions are gone. This is why drunken orgies often result in violence, sexual immorality, and destruction of relationships. We see this tragedy reenacted repeatedly everyday and everywhere. What follows is spiritual corruption and death (Hos 4:10-12). The metaphor is clear: those whose happiness rests only on the intoxicating pleasures of the world will end up spiritually dry because the vineyards are destroyed.

Therefore, God calls not only the pleasure-seekers in Israel many centuries ago, but also pleasure-seekers in our day—especially those in his churches—to weep and mourn over their sins.

You Vineyard Owners

After calling out pleasure-seekers, God warns the vineyard owners of a coming destruction because of their repeated violations of his covenant laws. The locust swarm is like a powerful nation with an unnumbered army that has invaded God's land. Notice that God still calls rebellious Judah "my land." The locusts are so powerful that their teeth are like that of a lion. They can strip

bare even the bark and branches of vines and fig trees (verses 6-7). Since there was no produce, the storehouses and granaries are empty and torn down (verse 17). Because the locusts have denuded the whole land, there was nothing left for their cattle, sheep and even the beasts of the field to eat (verse 18). Joel also mentions a great fire which might be a metaphor for the destruction wrought by the locusts (verses 19-20).

So God calls them out, *“Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers!”* Their whole lives depended on their wheat and barley, vineyard, fig, pomegranate, palm and apple trees. All of this produce symbolizes God’s blessing upon his people. These fruits of the land were not only vital for their economic prosperity. They also represented God’s nourishment of his people, so the people were refreshed and joyful in the abundance of these fruits (Deu 8:7-10). Remember what the spies carried off from their mission inside the Promised Land? They brought back to Moses and the people grapes, pomegranates and figs and reported that the land *“flows with milk and honey,”* a term used to describe the fertility and prosperity of the land (Num 13:23, 27).

Israel’s farmers are called to be ashamed of what has happened to their land after the locust invasion. They are put to shame because their preoccupation with economic prosperity and spiritual deadness led to the destruction of their farms. Therefore, this calamity brought a great cry of disappointment and despair among them. How important are their farms to them? We can get the reaction of a farmer today when his crops fail. One farmer in Kenya whose farm was destroyed by the swarm said that he was thinking of committing suicide because he and his family’s life depended on the farm.

The main reason why I chose to meditate on the prophecy of Joel for the next few Sundays is the parallel between Joel’s prophecy to what is happening today in the world, particularly in our nation. The coronavirus pandemic has caused fear, confusion, anxiety and despair all over the world. Many people have lost jobs, businesses have closed shops, the stock market has collapsed, and some economists are sure that there will be another Great Depression, if not another Great Recession. The stimulus package that the government approved exceeds all the previous stimulus packages combined. And even in the midst of this crisis, we see many people, especially young people, who have no care about the catastrophe around them. Instead, they continued their parties in the New Orleans Mardi Gras and in the spring break in Florida beaches.

In this coronavirus, God is shouting out to them, *“Weep and wail, lament and mourn, be ashamed, you drunkards and pleasure-seekers! “Weep and wail, lament and mourn, be ashamed, you corporations, businessmen, moneymakers and celebrities! Do you not see how I am displeased with your spiritual drunkenness and deadness? You only care about your riches, power, fame and pleasures, so I will remove all of them from you.”*

Sadly, what we have seen in the world and in our nation is that in a crisis like this, spirituality is not real and therefore short-lived. Remember how churches and other places of worship were filled for a few weeks after 9/11? People learned how to pray, but after that, it was business as usual. God was forgotten. It is almost certain that it will be the same this time. Judah was the

same. They repented of their sins while in exile in Babylon and were allowed by the Persian king to return to the Promised Land. They rebuilt the temple and their cities and replanted their farms. But after God restored them, they again descended into their former rebellion and unbelief.

So we must pray to God that this coronavirus plague will awaken our nation to return to God.

You Priests, Elders and Nation

And one of the signs of a people returning to God is the attendance in faithful churches during Lord's Day worship services. When we see megachurches with thousands of worshippers, we think that the church is healthy. But statistics show that membership has declined to only 50 percent today from 70 percent just twenty years ago. Weekly church attendance in evangelical churches has declined to only 45 percent. Worse, many of these are members of unfaithful, liberal churches.

In the last portion of Chapter 1, Joel calls out the priests, elders and the whole nation to assemble together to worship, pray and fast before God. His call is desperate and urgent, because if the wheat and barley, vineyard and palm were completely destroyed by the locust swarm, there would be no offerings during the worship services. The daily burnt offerings included grain and drink offerings which required the missing grain, wine and oil. The burnt offerings signified the people's repentance and consecration to God. The meal offerings symbolized the service of the worshiper made to God. And the drink offering represented the believers' joy and communion with God. When these offerings cease because of God's judgment through the locusts, true worship cannot be made. More than economic and pleasure deprivation, this spiritual deprivation is a more severe warning. It should lead the people into heartfelt repentance and contrition.

Therefore, Joel calls the priests first to the task, *"Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests."* Sackcloth signify mourning over the dead, but in this case, it is mourning over their sins. They must mourn because the grain, wine and oil are gone, so they are not able to offer daily grain and drink offerings in the house of God (verse 13). Next Joel calls the elders of Judah to a fast and to a solemn assembly in the house of the LORD, so they can all cry out to God in repentance of their sins. We often think of repentance as an individual act, and it is. But repentance can also be corporate, done during the worship service, as we do when we recite the Confession of Sin together.

Dear brothers and sisters: In Revelation 9, the apostle John saw an endtime vision of a swarm of locusts so great that the sun was darkened. But unlike the locust plague in Joel that destroyed the fields, John's locust invasion destroyed all the unbelievers on earth. These locusts were demons sent by Satan from hell. This means that the end of the world will not see a worldwide locust swarm, but God's destruction of the rebellious and faithless people of the world.

Joel warned his nation that the locust invasion was only a precursor to an even greater destruction, *"Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near"* (verse 15). The locust plague was merely a warning that a more terrible day of judgment against their sins is coming. The Babylonian

invasion in the 6th century B.C. fulfilled this Day of the LORD. The people were killed or exiled, and their cities and farms destroyed. Their temple was destroyed, so their worship and offerings ceased. Their kingdom also vanished from the earth. The coronavirus plague is also God's warning to us that there is a more terrible plague that will come on the Day of Christ.

Jesus warns us that the Day of the LORD will be unlike any other day. It is the Day of Judgment when he welcomes into heaven his people and sends unbelievers to hell where they will be tormented forever (Matt 25:34, 41). We must always stay awake, always waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ because that day will come *"like a thief in the night"* when all unbelievers will be sleeping in drunkenness but wake up to sudden destruction (1 Thess 5:2-6; 2 Pet 3:10).

For us, the Day of the LORD will come as the fulfillment of God's promise to us that *"he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ"* (Phil 1:6). But while we wait for that Day, Paul exhorts us *"to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ"* (Tit 2:12-13).