In 1915 clouds of locusts stripped bare the hills and fields of Palestine. Grains, fruits, vegetables and all manner of vegetation were devoured by swarms of “gregarious” locusts. The resulting devastation spiked six-fold the cost of basic food stuffs and caused widespread hunger and social dislocation. The New York Times reported, “Sugar and petroleum are unprocural and money has ceased to circulate.”

In response rabbis called for days of prayer, farmers used crude flame throwers to drive back these winged invaders, and politicians appointed commissions and launched campaigns. Laws were enacted requiring that all men between the ages of 15 and 60 collect 20 kilograms of locust eggs or pay a hefty fine. It was a determined human response to a plague of biblical proportions.

According National Geographic locust swarms have been measured at 460 square miles and can pack between 40 to 80 million locusts in less than half of a square mile. So….

- imagine the sky black with locusts,
- imagine the air thick with locusts,
- imagine locusts in your hair, in your eyes, in your mouth.

Each day, each locust can eat its weight in plants, therefore a swarm can eat 423 million pounds of plants in a day. So….

- imagine every tree stripped clean of leaves,
- imagine fertile fields gnawed to wastelands,
- imagine locusts crawling over one another to get to that last nibble of green.

Dear friends, nothing announces the advent of Jesus like a good plague story. Nothing says “Merry Christmas” like “gregarious” locusts. No? Why then this sermon introduction about locusts?

Well….

There is no consensus about when the prophet Joel wrote his little book but it opens with a locust attack. Listen to these first lines:

> What the cutting locust left the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left the hopping locust has eaten, what the hopping locust left the destroying locust has eaten. Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine; wail because the new wine has been snatched from your lips. A nation has invaded my land, a mighty army without number, it has the teeth of lions, the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste to my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving the branches white….

You get the idea. The rest of the book details other destructions, calls for lament and repentance, and offers images of a coming universal hope. But, it all starts with the locusts.
Now. Some biblical scholars read these ravaging locusts as a metaphor for an invading enemy. These are not just rampaging grasshoppers but a powerful poetic picture of a pagan army laying siege to Israel. Other scholars read the book not as an insect infestation but as a metaphor for that which strips us clean of every pretense or every prop.

- Addiction can lay bare the human soul.
- Cancer can shred the last vestige of human strength.
- Depression can destroy the roots of hope.
- Injustice can devastate the fruits of kindness.
- Loneliness can level life.
- Again, you get the idea.
- The locusts are a metaphor for that which makes life nasty, brutish, and short.

Either way, whether Joel is writing about actual insects or using a metaphor, I think the bigger question is: Does God employ clouds of locusts as a teaching tool? Does God exercise judgement by raining down destruction? Does God use plagues to teach his people a lesson? Are natural calamities divinely directed to make a point? Would a God who sent plagues on Egypt to wrench free his people send plagues on his people to wrench free their devotion?

What are we to make of the context for this morning’s texts? What if we think about it this way?

We began this nine-month-narrative-lectionary-sermon-series in Genesis 2 and I suggested scripture casts a conflict between chaos and shalom. To quote myself:

One way to read scripture is as a tug of war between the goodness of the God’s created order and the chaos of sin. The rest of scripture can be understood as a pitched battle between shalom and rebellion. A tug of war between life and death, gift and curse, light and dark, love and fear. That struggle is the dramatic conflict that animates scripture’s story.

So, it seems to me that we’re on shaky ground when we link natural phenomena (locusts, cancer, depression, hurricanes) to God’s will. Rather, they seem part of the curse and chaos that cripples creation. They are part of the seething struggle that grips creation. And, it is entirely plausible that Joel interpreted a locust invasion as something to drive God’s people back to God in repentance and dependence. I don’t know that it means God sent the locusts to make the same point….

But, we have also been reading that God keeps calling, commanding, chiding, and chasing after people. God pursues people to be vehicles of shalom for the rest of creation. God wades into world he created and aligns himself with Abraham, and Sarah, and David, and Jonah, and Jeremiah, and Joel, and a whole host of men and women that his will might be worked out.
Through promises and prophets, through kings and kingdoms, through the frail and the fallen God pursues shalom. God is not static, or stoic, or removed, but God is active, emotional and invested in shalom. And to that end he longs for our devotion and obedience to his way and will.

Two weeks ago I did a funeral for a three-month old baby. There was no warning or waiting. It was a SIDS death. Two wonderful, gentle, loving parents devastated, shredded, laid bare. A grief beyond our ability to shoulder….

I didn’t know the parents very well. I sat with them, wept with them, tried to help their family and friends gather to grieve with them. I find myself worrying, praying, thinking, longing for them….

It would be understandable to abandon God in this. It is easy to feel that God abandoned them. The struggle between chaos and shalom is cheap talk when your heart is shattered. And it would be an abomination to suggest that God would will such a loss that they might find their way back to God. That’s the behavior of a monster, not a God.

And yet, Joel writes in the darkest hour, even when the very earth shakes, even at the most dreadful, even now,

...return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God.

Dear friends, in the face of locusts, whether plague or metaphor, the call of scripture is to turn and open our hearts to God. The call is to turn toward the same God who enters into creation in pursuit of its shalom. The call is to turn toward the same God who desires devotion and obedience.


Almost lost in our translation is a wonderful little Hebrew word that shows up 240 times in the Old Testament. That word, hesed, is difficult to translate; it is bigger than, more elusive, not contained by an English equivalent. So hesed gets translated as loving-kindness, compassion, steadfast love, mercy, faithful love, loyal love, great love. When translated into Latin it’s often misericordia, which is mercy plus heart.

Hesed is a loyal love. It is stronger than any disappointment.
Hesed is a covenant love. It is stretches beyond feelings.
Hesed goes beyond the rule of law. It is not based in obligation but generosity.
Hesed is love offered steadfastly, without failure of waver.
Hesed is a strong love that doesn’t grow weary, or faint, or fail.
Hesed is what God does.
Hesed is who God is.
Joel says return to God because he is *hesed*.

...return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate (*hesed*), slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.

Dear friends, we would turn to God because of *hesed*. The locus of our hope is not the strength of our faith, the confidence in our insight, or the even the honesty of our repentance. The locus of our hope is the *hesed* of God.

In the midst of despair, laid low by grief, overwhelmed by clouds of locusts, stripped bare we would turn toward God because

- his compassion is more powerful than his wrath,
- his mercy bests his judgment,
- his loyal love is stronger than our fear.

The writer of Lamentations puts it this way:

*Because of the Lord’s great love (*hesed*) we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

I don’t know what locusts you are facing this morning. I know that for some of you they are overwhelming, the sky is dark, the struggle is real, but the good news is that God is *hesed*. God has not abandoned us. God will not abandon us. Because of *hesed* there is mercy enough for each day ~ new every morning.

That would seem a good place to end.

In the face of life’s locusts the locus of our hope is the *hesed* of God.

But, on the Second Sunday of Advent it seems fitting to remember that the *hesed* of God is a person. The loyal love of God is embodied in Jesus Christ ~ *hesed* in the flesh. The mercy-heart of God seeks after us, becomes one of us, even in the chaos and death of creation...

I can't say God sent the locusts any more than I can say God willed the death of a baby, but somehow, someway, beyond anything we can imagine, God was still there when the locusts attacked ~ he never left. Great is the faithfulness of God. The *hesed*, the steadfast love of God endures forever. Don’t be afraid.

Amen.