

Locusts Happen  
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
NUCC Traditional Ash Wednesday  
6 March 2019

\*PRAY

It was never this bad; not in their lifetime, not in anybody's lifetime. It was so terrible that children would tell their children who would then tell their children about this time of thick clouds, darkness, and destruction. All the fields were devastated, and the grain was ruined. Herds of cattle and sheep were dying of starvation. Fruit-bearing trees were splintered and drying up, withering away like the people's joy. It seemed like the whole world was coming to a terrible end. Everyone was lamenting and mourning. Everything seemed out of control.

What was happening? A military invasion? The results of a plague? Well, yes and no. This is the setting for today's scripture text, described in the first chapter of Joel. It was an invading army of locusts, common enough in First Testament times, but this may have been the worst ever, maybe even as bad as the locust horde that God visited upon Egypt as the eighth of ten Exodus plague persuaders.

Nothing seemed able to stop the locust onslaught and each locust seemed larger than life to an overwhelmed people. In fact, in the second chapter, according to the prophet Joel, "Nothing will ever be this bad again." And with this in-mind, perhaps we can understand better the alarm Joel calls for.

Locusts happen! Where could the people turn when there was nowhere to turn? And so I find myself asking: "**Where are the locusts in your life on this Ash Wednesday?**" What seems to be chaotic and out of control? Where are those fragile and tender places in your hearts? For some, financial burdens have become as

devastating as a horde of locusts. For others, family crises fill every thought and dream just like swarming locusts. Persisting sorrow and grief can drain energy reserves just like the cutting locusts. We know that locusts happen! Where do you turn when there is nowhere to turn?

As I have mentioned before, I am an Eagle Scout. My scouting experience was a tremendous and impactful for me. One of the most impactful experiences was the two-week High Adventure to Philmont Scout Ranch in Cimarron, New Mexico. I was the youngest participant in our crew, but I was also fortunate to have my dad attend with me. We hiked 90 miles in 10 days, taking everything we needed on our backs. It was a character-building experience.

One of the many stories to come from that trip was the evening that we were seated, eating dinner and I was asked to go turn off the cooking stove that was boiling water. I gladly agreed and went to do so. These were simple cooking stoves that were intended for light-weight and rugged use. Either I wasn't paying attention or simply had a forgetful moment, but I turned the cap to the white-gas cooking stove the wrong direction and kept turning, until I sent the cap one direction and propane onto an open flame.

Instantly, there was a cloud of flame coming at me and going upward toward the tarp that we had set up over our cooking area. Fire singed my eyebrows, arm hair and hairline. My companions on the journey were able to extinguish the fire quickly without me setting half of New Mexico on fire.

And I remember collapsing into my dad's arms in tears, embarrassed by my mistake and afraid of damage that I had caused. It was if the prophet Joel had spoken these words over me:

“Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for [God] is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

Wouldn't it be wonderful if life was more like a movie or television show in which the good always wins in the end? Every story should have a happy ending. Every life should be filled with joyous music and dancing. Every cloud should have a silver lining. Every sour lemon that comes our way should be squeezed into lemonade by a couple of spiritual disciplines.

I'm still an optimist, but I'm not simplistic. Trumpet blowing, lamenting, fasting, and garment tearing did not drive away every locust horde in First Testament times. Outward acts of piety were not necessarily guarantors of faithful relationships with the Lord; not then, not now. Sometimes our best efforts and intentions fail. Locusts happen!

But the question is still before us, where do we turn when there is nowhere to turn? My hope and prayer is that each of us will use this Lenten season to turn our hearts to God, not because the God guarantees to make the locusts disappear forever, but because, as the prophet Joel promises, “[God] is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

Amid life's overwhelming locust swarms, the overflowing love of the Lord comforts and strengthens us for the daily journey. The ashes placed on our foreheads today will disappear in a little while, but the water poured over us at our Baptism left a permanent mark of God's steadfast love. And the ashes point us to the empty cross of

Easter, which remind us that there is no power in this world that can overcome the power of God, not even death. Amen.