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The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

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Joel 2



A swarm of locusts isn't something to mess around with. There is always trouble in their company. You may or may not know a desert locust swarm can pack 60 million locusts into less than half a square mile and stretch to 460 square miles in size. When the book of Joel talks about the locust, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, and how they've ripped the heart out the people of Judah, you know it's describing every farmer's worst nightmare. Each locust can eat its weight in plants in 24 hours, so a full-size locust swarm could eat 423 million pounds of plants a day. A whole year of crops, a whole community's livelihood, a whole nation's survival can be devoured in minutes. There's something about a locust attack – in its swarming, in its insatiable appetite, in its savage obliteration of the crops – that evokes a horror movie. There's nothing to be done other than to grab the shoulder of the person next to you, sink your fingernails into their forearm, and scream.

I wonder if you know what it means to experience the devastation of the swarming locust. I'm not just thinking of the devastation brought up crops and farmland. I'm thinking of a friend who spent her 20s self-medicating her way through the anxiety of new jobs, new partners, and new living situations. Now in a 12-step program, she is seeking to make amends of all the carnage in her wake. While she is now doing better, serving others, she can't help but wonder, "But what about all those wasted years?"

Another friend of mine recently made a discovery about his childhood. He experienced enormous amounts of pressure from his parents to excel in school and in athletics to be as successful as they were. He never got to be himself, pursue his own passions and projects. "Some kids played before their parents; I performed before mine," he says. He wouldn't offer it in his first conversation with you, but he may eventually confess, "I was robbed of those precious years."

I'm thinking of the lady who was telling me of her first marriage. Fresh out of college and at her Wall Street job, she fell instantly for one of the bank's top executives, several years older. Within months she moved into his Manhattan apartment, and they were married within a year. She told me how she knew from the get-go it was a mistake, and yet admitting a mistake is

sometimes harder than enduring its consequences. She couldn't tell herself, at first, that she married a narcissist, but slowly she came to see the light. And after six years, she divorced him. And after 30 years, she still doesn't know what to make of that time. "Those are lost years."

I wonder if any of these stories feel like your story. What they have in common is that, in each case, the person felt they'd been robbed of a whole section of their life. They felt, looking back, that all those years had disappeared into a hole. It wasn't just that they had no good memories of those times. It was that there was, even now, nothing to be said about those times, no meaning to be made of them – those years were so covered in shame and shrouded in regret that they couldn't even be shared with any but the most trusted confidante.

Consider the 2020 and 2021 lockdowns, the two+ years of isolation and distance and loneliness. I wonder what those years were like for you. For Katie and I, new to Lincoln, it was difficult, and frankly its still hard to tie a neat bow around it, with three positive takeaways. I wonder how you are processing that time, that season that the locust had eaten. Say you were in high school or college: you know about the time that was lost; maybe you feel like you were robbed. Not just of your time and experience and fun, but of an entire philosophy on which you were raised that told you, "If you do your best, study hard, and be kind, the future will receive your blossoming self with open and favorable arms." A whole way of thinking about our world – destroyed. If you were separated from a niece, a mother, a brother – you know what I am speaking of, too. We did so much just trying to survive, but part of me wonders we stand before God's presence on that final day with our life open before Him, it will be these two past years that may stick out as two of the hardest for many.

We know about the locust and what the locust has eaten.

There may well have been a locust swarm in Judah in the fifth-century that destroyed livelihoods and ruined farmers and left the people starving. But for the prophet Joel, the swarm of locusts is a metaphor for the invading armies that had swarmed into the land of Israel in the preceding centuries, laying waste to the cities and plundering the countryside and leaving the children of God in utter despair. And this is where the power of the metaphor really kicks in. God visits every part of the suffering

land and reawakens it, starting with the soil, and moving on to the animals of the field, and the trees, and finally the rainclouds. Then, when everything is come back to life, God delivers his promise that the people will eat in plenty and be satisfied, that he, the Lord, will dwell in the midst of them, and that they will never again be put to shame.

This is great and welcome news, and the people are bound to hear it metaphorically as well as literally, that's to say as a promise that the long years of subjection to foreign rule are coming to an end and there will be good times for Israel once more. But think back to what this means for you, on a personal level. Your long nightmare is more or less over, and there's hope of good things to come. That's great. But where does that put those lost years?

"I will restore the years the swarming locust has eaten." Do you hear? This is not just a promise about the future. Not just a determination that the good times will roll and you can put the past behind you. No. Something more and different. A promise of healing the past. "I will restore the years the swarming locust has eaten." Think of the young man whose brother spent all those years in prison. "I will restore those years." Think of the woman who had an entire decade all but decimated by addiction. "I will restore those years." Think of the woman who suffered a marriage that was a blackhole of regret and neglect. "I will restore those years." "I will restore the years the swarming locust has eaten."

I wonder what your locust place looks like. As you reflect on your life, I wonder if you notice where within is that "Do Not Enter" sign. When a word like we've heard from Joel touches this place, that where the locust has been, we feel disbelief and doubt – we've likely erected a hedge of protection around this place to avoid the emotions. Our lives having been a subtle but steadfast and orchestrated effort to keep others out – God included.

The tempting thing to do for the place the locust has eaten is to identify someone to blame – often it's the person closest by, like our spouse; or someone who represents a lot of power like a president. Assigning blame, for us creatures this side of Eden, is one of our most developed and subtlest of skills and is a way for us to feel a sense of control over our pain, slightly less threatened by it. But notice, there is no space for blame in our passage. Swarming locusts aren't evil. They're just locusts. They do terrible damage, but they're part of creation like the rest of

us. The point is, finding who's to blame for those lost years isn't the answer. The years are still lost, whoever's to blame. This isn't about vindication. This is about something more wonderful. This is about restoration. This is about something that was lost becoming found, something that was a burden and a curse and a plague becoming a gift.

How can that happen? How can the unspeakable be restored as something that brings hope? Let's look together very closely at how it can happen. Restore can mean replace. Well, on the surface, it looks like that's what God is offering. He's offering grain and wine and oil to replace the ones taken by the locusts. But replacing is not restoring. When a friend has a precious possession and you break it and you get the money together and you get them a new one and take it round to them, they pretend and you pretend that the replacement is just the same; but it never is. Restore can also mean reimburse. When something's lost you can try to make up for it by compensating for its monetary value; but things that are really valuable are worth a whole lot more than money. More often than not you'd take the money, but you never for a moment think the reimbursement is the same as restoration.

"I will restore the years." Those years can't be replaced and you can't be reimbursed for them. So how can they be restored? Well, they can be reintegrated. That's to say, they can come to shape your future in unexpected and beautiful ways. It happens when we begin to realize that the discarded and disowned bits of our pasts are what hold the keys to our future. We'd all like to imagine we walk forward into our future, freely choosing who we are and who we plan to be, but the truth is we walk backwards into our future, composing our reactions and behavior in unforeseen circumstances out of the discarded elements in our own personal histories – those wasted years have tremendous power: they have the power to bind us to our wounds; or they have the power to lead us to the God who liberates us by reintegrating our pasts into a larger story. If you're thinking to yourself, "I can't imagine any circumstances in which those locust years could come to offer any kind of blessing," the answer may be, "Perhaps not yet."

But it makes me think of a moment at our Men's retreat yesterday, as we reflected on God's presence in the midst of COVID. In this discussion, one of our insightful priests shared that his journal, which he faithfully kept on a daily basis pre COVID,

had a huge 1-year gap in it. He's gone back to that blank and wrote in "COVID happened." There's nothing more to say. But he's resumed journaling; there are pages on the other side of the blank. This is the promise Joel holds forth. Your blank page can still belong in the story of your life. You will continue to write. And here is what God promises: those blank moments when you couldn't write, that's precisely where I am writing those into a larger story of hope and healing. As we were reflecting on COVID, and I was offering my maudlin reflections, someone said one word that woke me up. "Addie." God gave us a daughter! I don't have a lesson, a takeaway from the locust season; we have something better: new life.

Listen to those words once more. "I will restore the years." Just imagine you were promised a future that didn't just replace what the locust had eaten, didn't just reimburse you for it, but truly grafted those years back into your destiny, reintegrated them no longer now as burden and curse but instead as wisdom and compassion. Just imagine, in other words, that you were being given the gospel – the gospel that restores our past and opens out our future. That's what the gospel does. And what's the word that describes succinctly the heart of this gospel? The word is resurrection.

More than replacement, more than reimbursement, more than reintegration, more than restoration: the word for what we are talking about is resurrection. The locusts scorched the earth till there was no life in it. Jesus too was buried in that scorched earth and there was no life in him. But he was brought back into the story, he was restored, so all those years the locust had eaten, the years of his ministry in Nazareth and Galilee, and before them the years of God's companionship with Israel over many centuries and glories and tragedies, all those locust years are restored to us – and we call them the Bible, our source of wisdom and compassion, our joy and our gift, the gift that comes from the restoration of those years. It's resurrection that finally heals the locust years, resurrection that gives us back our past as a gift, resurrection that begins to create our hopeful future out of the ruins of our wasted histories.

"I will restore the years the swarming locust has eaten." Think again about your wasted years, your locust years. Is it really beyond God to restore even them? Are you happy to let the swarming locust have the last word? The God who transformed

the greatest waste of all, the ruthless slaying of his son – can he not restore your years? Can he not resurrect ... even you?