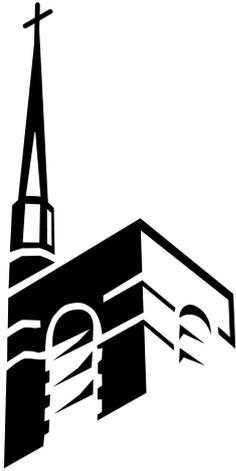


June 16, 2013



Twice Told Tales:
“THE YEAR OF THE LOCUST”

Dr. John E. Harnish
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Joel 1 and 2

Well, they’re back. They only come around once every 17 years. Basically, they do very little harm and very little good. No, I am not talking about some church members. I am talking about the Periodic Cicada, those large-headed, stout-bodied, waxy-winged bugs, the longest living of any insect on earth. They only appear above ground for a few days in their long life span, just long enough to mate and die and leave behind their offspring which return underground for another 17 years. This year, a brood born in 1996 is rousing from their long sleep on the eastern seaboard—30 billion of them, each female capable of producing 600 eggs.

We sometimes mistakenly call them locusts, but they aren’t. The prophet Joel could tell you the difference. He is writing about 800 BC in the midst of one of those unimaginable locust plagues when they appeared in hoards of millions, even billions, blackening the sky in their flight and filling the air with their terrifying screeching, moving rank on rank like an invading army, eating every twig of grass and sprig of grain in sight. One swarm was said to have covered two thousand square miles. It must have been an awesome, frightening sight, and with no insecticides, no technology, practically no warning, and nothing but a rake or a broom to try to fend them off, mere human beings were left helpless in the face of the utter destruction of their crops and their livelihood.

Joel gives a graphic description:

Surely a day of darkness and gloom is upon us
Before them the land is a Garden of Eden, behind them a wasted wilderness.
The earth shakes, the heavens shudder.
The sun and moon are darkened, and the stars forebear to shine.

Then he describes the result:

What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten.
What the hopping locust has left, the destroying locust has eaten.

It was the year of the locust.

Again this week I am quoting one of my favorite preachers and reprising a sermon I preached here in 2008. The preacher is Dr. J. Ellsworth Kalas, former president at my alma mater, Asbury Seminary. Dr. Kalas once preached on this text and said:

I have never seen a locust plague, but I understand what Joel is saying. I have seen another kind of locust, the kind that can destroy a person.

I have watched the locusts move in on a life like an army; seen them pass through the field of a person's life, making them believe they can never be fruitful again.

(J. Ellsworth Kalas, "The Years Which The Locust Hath Eaten," Church of the Saviour, Cleveland, Ohio, Nov. 15, 1981, page 2)

And so have I. I preached this sermon in 2008, in the heart of the great recession, which was in many ways our own "year of the locust." Lives, families, businesses, communities, churches—years that the locust devoured.

Joel begins with the simple acknowledgement: The year of the locust will come.

The song-writer of my generation nailed it: "Momma said there'd be days like this"...and she was right. Bad things do happen to good people. Life is not always fair. Hurricanes and cancers, earthquakes and family crises, broken bones, broken marriages, battered businesses, bunions and bruises, burdens too numerous to bear. Some are caused by human failures and problems we bring on ourselves, or sometimes they are the result of the unjust action of others over which we have no control. All I can say is, "It happens." To all of us at one time or another, the locusts come.

For Michigan, 2008 and the years that have followed seem like a year of the locust.

We've seen our major industries shrink and shudder on the brink of collapse. We've lived through a great housing crisis, stock market failure and global economic uncertainty, much of it caused by the locusts of greed and selfishness and irresponsibility. And now our central city teeters on the brink of bankruptcy.

As a church, in these years we have had to make hard but responsible choices—freezing salaries, reducing staff benefits, cutting part-time positions, reducing clergy staff. In these days, you as a congregation and I as a pastor have been through times like we never experienced before...years of the locust.

Joel doesn't attempt to explain the "why" of tragedy, but rather he looks to find God present in the midst of the crisis. He doesn't try to say, "God must have a reason for this," but rather, "Where can we find God in this?" Joel simply acknowledges the reality of the times, and then tries to find God present. He offers three ways God is at work in the year of the locust:

1. In the year of the locust, we hear the call to return to God.

“Return to me with all your heart,” says the Lord. “Return to the Lord your God, for God is gracious and merciful. God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

Global strife, economic uncertainty, personal tragedy—the year of the locust can drive us to the depth of our souls, push us to the bedrock of our lives. It can be the opportunity to return to God. Peter Gomes, former chaplain at Harvard University, once wrote:

God does not send terror or tragedy, but God uses the terror and tragedy, even as he uses the sublime and the beautiful, the mysterious and the rational to get our attention.

All of these, God uses to get through to thick-headed, good-hearted people. Life can begin again only when God gets our attention and we are in a position to hear what God has to say.

(Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, page 75)

I can't tell you how many times I have heard it in the hospital room or the funeral home or the counseling session. When bad news comes, when death occurs, when people discover they can not handle life on their own, in those moments we sense the need of God's grace and mercy, strength and courage, wisdom and love in ways we never realized before. When we feel like we have conquered the mountain and have the tiger by the tail, it's easy to believe we are “self-made” and that we can pretty much handle things on our own, thank you, God, very much. But when we come to the end of our rope, when life crashes in and we have nowhere else to go, *then* we hear the call to return to God and we discover that indeed, “God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

I have to admit that I have learned more about God's grace in the difficult times, in year of the locust, than at any other time. In the year of the locust, we hear the call to return to God...

2. And in the year of the locust, we discover what matters most.

Again, I have heard it said so often through these recent years: times like these force us to make choices about where we invest our time, talents, gifts and service. In our personal finances and congregational finances, we have been forced to make decisions about what matters most. And it's not been easy, especially for your staff.

I want to say how much I love and appreciate the talent, the dedication and the work of this incredible staff with whom I have been blessed to share in ministry. When I arrived eight years ago, I discovered a creative and committed team who loved working together and who welcomed me and supported me in what could have been a difficult transition. I also want to say publically how much I appreciated the support Bob Ward and Bill Ritter offered me, and I vow to do the same for Gary and Laurie Haller.

Then over these years, as many of our well-loved staff members retired, we welcomed a new generation of talented leaders. They have borne the brunt of most of our budget cuts, every year

doing more with less, and I will always admire them for it. My hope is that in the future you will be able to rebuild the staff and support them in the ways they deserve. Together we have struggled to make the most of the time, talent and resources available, to reevaluate your priorities and reorient your lives. That's what happens in "the year of the locust." The year of the locust calls us to discover what matters most...

3. *And the year of the locust is a time to catch a new vision.*

Joel heard God's word and caught a glimpse of God's vision in ways he might have missed when his belly was full and the fields were rolling with amber waves of grain. In the year of the locust, Joel heard God's promise, which became Peter's text on the Day of Pentecost:

Afterward, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream and your young men shall see visions. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Joel 2:28, 32)

When things are going well, when it seems "good enough" is good enough, it is easy to settle for things just the way they are. But in times of crisis we are forced to look beyond this moment and claim the promise of God's good future. The year of the locust is a time to look beyond the present and catch a vision of what God can do.

When I preached this sermon in 2008, I said:

Right now, it is more important than ever to be looking ahead to see where God is leading for the future. Otherwise we can easily become so focused on the locust storms of the present that we lose hope for the future and end up giving in to despair. The year of the locust is exactly the time we need to be seeking a new vision and dream for the future, planning for the next generation.

Five years ago, right in the heart of the great recession, this congregation adopted the "Next Generation Report," casting a vision which included the renovation of the Fellowship Hall to become a place of "radical hospitality." They were terrible economic times, and there were plenty of reasons to hold off, to put it off. But even when the economy seemed the darkest, lo and behold, you caught the dream, you believed in the vision, you did the work, and you made it happen, even in the year of the locust.

In the midst of all the darkness, Joel heard the great, reassuring promise of God, "I will repay you the years that the swarming locust has eaten." God says, "I will give you back more than you have lost." You will discover that in God's good tomorrow there is hope and blessing and joy, thanksgiving and celebration and new life, all to be found even in the year of the locust.

One of my favorite hymns begins: "*When peace like a river attendeth my way...*" Ah, we like that, don't we? Peace like a river, beside still waters, in green pastures. We all love the days of peace like a river. But that is not all there is to life.

The hymn writer goes on to say: “*When sorrows like sea billows roll...*” He realizes life is a mix of peaceful rivers and sea billows, bountiful harvest and devouring locusts, joy and sorrow, laughter and tears, better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness and health.

Yet in the midst of it all we are bold to sing: “*Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.*”

Even in the year of the locust, “It is well; it is well with my soul.” (United Methodist Hymnal, page 377)