

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

Date: March 2, 2022

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Joel 2:12–19

Epistle Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

Gospel Reading: Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Sermon Text: Joel 2:12–19

Sermon Title: A Call to Return

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 51:1–13



Return to the Lord

Hymns:

LSB 613 – To Thee, Omniscient Lord of All

LSB 422 – On My Heart Imprint Your Image
Break Your Hearts (*Tune LSB 512*)

LSB 607 – From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee

LSB 955 – Let the Vineyards Be Fruitful

LSB 434 – Lamb of God, Pure and Holy

LSB 625 – Lord Jesus Christ, Life-Giving Bread

LSB 680 – Thine the Amen, Thine the Praise

LSB 937 – Lord, Bid Your Servant Go in Peace

LSB 418 – O Lord, throughout These Forty Days

Liturgy:

Creative Worship



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Text: Joel 2:12–19

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.”

Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber.

Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, “Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

Then the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. The Lord answered and said to his people, “Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.”

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“Return to the Lord your God.” This is the focus of our season of Lent this year: Return to the Lord and His Word. We hear in His Holy Word God calling out to us:

- † “Return to Prayer”
- † “Return from Betrayal”
- † “Return from False Witness”
- † “Return from Denial”
- † “Return to the Kingdom of God”
- † “Return to the Table”
- † “Return to Truth”
- † “Return to the Church”
- † “Return and See”

what God has done for you.

As we launch this series, we gather together first to hear the prophecy of the prophet Joel and God’s invitation. Our Old Testament Reading from Joel gets us focused on the season. It highlights the problem and lays out the solution in all its grace and simplicity. God calls us to return to Him, return to His Word, because He will address our needs and provide for our salvation.

Our task today is simple:

First, we will look at Joel’s prophecy and the context in which it came. What was going on? How did God’s Words speak to the situation? And how did that sound to the people to whom it was first delivered?

Second, we will explore how this prophecy applies to us. Are these words only for the Israelites of ancient days, or do they have something to teach us here, now?

Finally, we will hear this invitation and promise offered to us, and spend a little time getting focused to how we will walk this road which God has laid out for us.

Let’s begin by getting some idea of whom Joel was and to whom he was speaking. We don’t know a lot about Joel. He was a prophet in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The book that bears his name is relatively short, but it is rich and deep and complex. His book begins with a plague of locusts that

would strike Israel. That served to foreshadow the coming “Day of the Lord.” Joel’s message is straightforward: a day of judgment will come. He pleads with the people to turn to God so that they would be found righteous on that “great and awesome day.”¹

The outline of Joel’s prophecy is fairly simple:

PART 1: There’s an invasion of locusts that will destroy all vegetation. Joel calls the people to fast at the Temple and then offers a prayer of lament over the coming destruction.

PART 2: If you thought that was bad, there’s something more coming: “The day of the LORD is coming; it is near.”² Joel describes the Lord’s army using the example of the destroying locusts. He issues a call to “Return to the Lord” and to fast and pray at the Temple.

PART 3: God responds. First, to the locust plague, offering healing and restoration. Then, on a much bigger scale, God responds in the day of the Lord, giving salvation to those who call on His name, and passing judgment on those who do not.

The message is “Return to the Lord.” Our first reading for today comes from right out of the center of the book. The of the swarm of locusts has been completed; the comparison to the Lord’s army, and the Day of the Lord, has been made; and we are left wondering what can be done? Can anything be done?

It’s not entirely unlike when the rich young man approached Jesus and asks what good deeds he must do to have eternal life. Jesus tells the young man to sell all of his possessions and give to the poor. The young man walks away. Jesus turns to His disciples and explains how difficult it is for someone to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, when other gods (like money) get in the way. The Bible records the disciples “were greatly astonished, saying, ‘Who then can be saved?’³”

You can almost hear Joel’s audience asking the same question: “Who then can be saved? Is there any hope? Can this place endure the sin that plagues it?”

1 Joel 2:31

2 Joel 2:1

3 Matthew 19:25

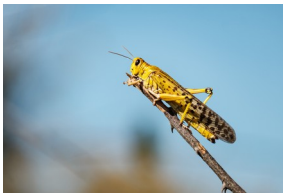
Joel brings good news. He brings a promise. It is simple:

It shall come to pass
that everyone who calls
on the Name of the LORD
shall be saved.⁴

The only one thing, the only simple thing, they need to do is Return to the Lord,

for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love;
and He relents over disaster.⁵

The only thing they need to do is stop trusting in themselves and to trust in God. They needed to realize, just as they could not stop the swarming locusts, neither will they be able to stop the judgment that comes. It will come. All will be affected. The only solution, the only salvation, is to Return to the Lord.



So here's the question: Is this call to Return to the Lord only for who first heard them? Are these only old words for an old people, long since gone? Can those words speak to us today? Are we facing a "swarm of locusts" that threatens to destroy?

That threat is real. There are small, unassuming little things; that each do a little bit of damage, but they add up. They add up to a destructive force that descends and decimates everything good in its path. Your sins are your locusts. Your rejection of God's Word is a consuming locust. While one little locust doesn't seem all that terrifying, when the full revelation of your deeds is made known, it is breathtaking and terrifying. Even more so when we learn:



The wages of sin is death.⁶

and

4 Joel 2:32
5 Joel 2:13
6 Romans 6:23

The soul who sins shall die.⁷

This locust swarm of our sins should be frightening indeed. Joel's words can and should hit you the same way they hit the people of Israel. The Day of the Lord will come, and with it destruction. A purging of the evil that consumes souls and drives people away from God. There is no way to escape it. The times you looked to to improve yourself at other's expense. When you covet your neighbor's property. When you speak ill of your others and use God's name to do it. When you blow off worship and Bible study because you don't need that stuff. When you decided you know better than God. That is a swarm of locusts, and it brings nothing but destruction. This swarm brings eternal death and condemnation which should terrify, but those who reject God's Word also reject the warnings no matter how clearly they are given.

Joel does bring good news. He brings a promise. It is simple:

It shall come to pass
that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD
shall be saved.⁸

Return to the Lord your God,

for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love;
and He relents over disaster.⁹

In spite of your sinful rejection of God, He still invites you to return to Him, and promises to bless you. The current future does not have to be inevitable. Stop trusting in yourself and look to God. Know you cannot stop the swarming anymore than you can can't stop Judgment Day from coming. It will come. All will be affected. The only solution is to Return to the Lord. Return to His Word.

Over the coming weeks, we are going to explore more deeply how God's call to return should affect in our lives. We will do that by walking in the steps of the disciples and those close to Jesus in the final days of His

7 Ezekiel 18:20)

8 Joel 2:32

9 Joel 2:13

teaching, leading up to His crucifixion. We will hear the call to return as it echoes in their ears. I pray we come to understand and hear it the way they did.

Next Wednesday we will spend some time with Peter, James and John as they accompany Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. As we hear the call to “Return to Prayer.” Similar subjects will follow each week of Lent. I’m invite each of you to be here for each service as we follow Joel’s call to:

gather the people. Consecrate the congregation;
assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing
infants.¹⁰

We will come together and listen to God’s call, and we will return to Him
for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love.¹¹

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts
and your minds in Christ Jesus, our saving faith. Amen.

**Proclaim God's Word,
Encourage one another in faith,
Witness to God's love and
Serve all people**



10 Joel 2:16
11 Joel 2:13