

"God's Spirit Poured Out" A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
October 27, 2019, Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
Joel 2: 23-32

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

When Linda and I were living in Ohio we took a trip to Pennsylvania one summer. One of the experiences I was looking forward to on the trip was driving on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I think my interest came from my High School American history class where I had read about this early turnpike, a log-surfaced road constructed in the late 1700s to speed horse and buggy travel. What did it look like now? Well, what I discovered was a road with short onramps – made for slow moving buggies to merge into traffic with slow moving buggies – not cars driving 65 miles per hour. The turnpike was nowhere near as nice as the Interstate System I had experienced in the Midwest.

Another lasting memory from that trip came as we drove down one of the many rolling hills of Pennsylvania, down into a valley. What we saw before us was truly shocking. It was the middle of the summer, yet the trees had no leaves on them. The forest in front of us looked as though it belonged in a winter scene where the trees were bare and stark against the white snow. Except there was no snow. The trees were denuded of leaves and stark against the vegetation growing on the forest floor.

We had read in the newspaper that a caterpillar had invaded parts of Pennsylvania. We were seeing the devastation of that invasion. I wondered; would the lack of leaves kill the trees? Would the trees recover? If they recovered, how long would it take for the forest to return to the pre-invasion state?

In today's reading from the Old Testament, Joel writes about the Hebrew people who were suffering because of a locust invasion, an invasion that had decimated the crops creating food shortages. The destruction of the crops was so complete that Joel lamented that the priests in the temple did not have grain or drink offerings to sacrifice to God.

I'm sure the people of Joel's day had the same type of questions I had about the denuded trees we saw. When would recovery happen? But in this case recovery of the crops? When would the crops recover? A devastated crop was a serious issue. Not only did the crops provide food, but the crops also provided the seed for the following year's planting. You just didn't go to the local seed store and purchase seeds to plant. You had to save seeds from one year's crop to plant for next year's crop. After a devastating locust invasion, it might take at least three years to fully recover from one year's crop destroyed by the locust.

Locusts are still around. We occasionally read about invasions in Africa that result in food shortages and starvation. I even read one account where the government tried to fight the invasion but didn't have enough helicopters to spray the locust because there were so many locusts eating the crops.

Here in the USA, we live in a pretty calm environment, don't we? Our lives are usually stable, and our way of life is rarely threatened. Our country hasn't experienced a devastating locust invasion since 1931. Though you might remember in July of this year that Las Vegas experienced a grasshopper invasion, but it didn't threaten the country's food supply.

But what happens when we have to deal with something unpredictable or threatening, as the Hebrew people did with the locust invasion? What happens when we have a health issue – a heart attack or a loved one dies, or the national government shuts down for a few days? What happens when a forest fire devastates a community? These are unpredictable happenings that affect us - resulting in a range of emotions from deep despair to minor irritations.

The Hebrew people were in deep despair over the locust plague. They had nothing to eat. What were they to do? Had God deserted them? Joel told the people that the locust were a warning to God's people. The locust devastation was a wake-up call concerning their relationship with God.

Don't we, too, have our wake-up calls from God, our tragedies, our failures? Joel says this one event was intended to point people back to God. Perhaps that may be the case with you. Perhaps your 'locust invasion' points you to God. Now, I'm not saying that God sent you the locusts in your life. What I will say is that each of us needs to consider if God is using such events in our lives to draw us closer to God – as God did in Joel's day.

How do you respond to the locust attacks in your life, the problems in your life? Do you fight back? Do you get depressed and withdraw? Do you blame the whole thing on someone else? Or do you draw closer to God and work on your spiritual life?

Like the Hebrew people in Joel's day, when you are attacked, turning to God is the wise thing to do. In the Bible we see time and again that God encourages God's people, and that would be you and me, to turn to God in times of crisis. Just as in Joel's time when God did something about the locusts, God will act on our behalf – once we place our faith in God.

If we accept that God will act on our behalf, then what should our response be to God after the immediate crisis is over? Some may go back to their old ways; some may take God for granted. What does Joel see? Joel envisions the people responding to God and living in a new way. That living in a new way results because God will pour out the Holy Spirit on all people. Let me reread verse 28 and 29: **Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.**

God will pour out God's Spirit on all people no matter race, creed, or gender. What's interesting in these verses from Joel is that in the Old Testament we usually read about God pouring out the Holy Spirit on an individual. The Spirit only stays with them until they fulfill the task God has given them. Joel tells of a day when all will receive the Spirit. Those who receive the Holy Spirit will prophesy; and not just men, but women also. This is truly a new day, a new order in the world.

Prophecy doesn't necessarily mean to speak of the future. A good definition comes from Former chaplain to the United States Senate, Lloyd Ogilvie. He says, "The most dynamic one-to-one evangelists in my congregation are those who ask for and receive the gift of prophecy. They do not have canned monologues to bore people. Rather, they know how to listen, how to care, and how to empathize with love. The Spirit gives them insight about what to say, timing for when to say it, boldness to be honest, personal, and incisive in helping people to respond."

We live in post-resurrection time and as Christ-followers we believe that the day Joel envisioned has already happened. It happened at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and then on believers. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit and that promise was fulfilled at Pentecost.

When you think about it, Peter's sermon at Pentecost was much like Joel's message. Peter told those in Jerusalem to repent, to turn to God and enjoy God's blessings. That was Joel's message, but Peter went a bit further. Whereas Joel envisioned a time where the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all people, Peter could tell the people to receive the Holy Spirit, since the Spirit was available to all who called on the name of Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Peter's sermon went on to explain how all this could happen – through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the promised Messiah.

Where are you today in your life? Think for a moment about the locusts in your life, your problems. How have you responded to your problems? Have you tried to deal with them yourself or have you turned to God for help? If you have turned to God and asked God to help you, are you enjoying God's blessings?

Many Christians today are enjoying God's blessings. I know that I am, and I know that many of you are. But what about the next step – living in the Spirit?

Joel says when the Spirit is poured out on us, we will prophesy or tell others about God. Jesus' disciples provide an example here. They were living in the Spirit. They were sharing their amazing life with others, living in community. They were telling others what God has done for them and what God will do for the person the disciple was talking to.

Can you see a progression here? Where are you on this progression leading to life in the Spirit, the exciting life Joel prophesied? Let me go over them again. Step one: just living with your locusts. Step two: realizing you have a problem. Step three: asking for and accepting God's help. Step four: enjoying God's blessings. Step five: living in the Spirit.

Perhaps you're like me and realize you may be living with problems that you've not yet turned over to God. You probably have turned over other problems to God and you're living with the blessings. Sometimes I believe I'm living in the Spirit and then at other times I seem blocked. It seems to me that I live in the Spirit when I help others to deal with their locusts. And isn't that what God wants us to do – share with others what God has done for us and wants to do for them?

For this next week, take time to consider what your locusts are and how you are dealing with them. I pray that all of you are living with God's blessings. I'd be interested in hearing your stories about how you are living in the Spirit. Perhaps you know someone living through a locust invasion who needs God's Spirit poured out on them. Tell them about your experience with God!