

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Sound the trumpet; ... sound the alarm.” Joel sounded the alarm about a coming plague of locusts. Perhaps warnings were proclaimed late one July morning in 1874. 12-year-old farm girl Lillie Marcks watched the sunlight dim and a peculiar darkness sweep over the Kansas sky. A whirring, rasping sound followed, and there appeared, as she later recalled, “a moving gray-green screen between the sun and earth.” Then something dropped from the cloud like hail, hitting her family’s house, trees and picket fence. A child in Jefferson County, Kansas, who had gone out at midday to draw water from the well exclaimed: “They’re here! The sky is full of ’em. The whole yard is crawling with the nasty things.” A settler in Edwards County, Kansas, reported: “I never saw such a sight before. This morning, as we looked up toward the sun, we could see millions in the air. They looked like snowflakes.” What this Kansas trio saw that summer day was also observed by others statewide and across Dakota Territory, Montana Territory, Wyoming Territory, Colorado Territory, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) and Texas.

These hordes of locusts were destructive. Nothing was safe in their path. The locusts scoured the fields of crops, trees of leaves, every blade of grass, wool off sheep, harnesses off horses, paint off wagons and the handles off pitchforks. They feasted for days, even devouring the clothing and quilts farmhands threw protectively over the vegetable gardens. The farmers quipped that these locusts “ate everything but the mortgage.”

I can only imagine how frightening it was to see that darkening cloud of locusts. Did they think it was the end of the world? Was this God’s wrath? Some of them may

have very well thought of the plague we read in Joel. In Joel's prophecy, God's wrath and natural disaster are clearly linked. The destruction of the land by these hordes of locusts was God's punishment. Maybe the people in July 1894 thought it was God's punishment. Punishment for what? Joel does not tell us. Scholars and others have long speculated on what sins might have prompted God to send the locusts, but this speculation misses the point entirely. The prophet is silent about moral causality of this event. What Joel is interested in is the response called for by this catastrophic event. Joel is warning about the "Day of the Lord." For many Israelites the Day of the Lord meant the day when God would make Israel a strong and victorious nation again. But here Joel is referring to it as a day of judgment.

Our passage begins with a word of warning "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm...." Joel goes on to declare, "Rend your hearts and not your garments." "Return to the Lord." "Fast and weep." Those are words we don't hear too often today. And if someone were to proclaim those words, most people would probably avoid those people as much as possible. Tonight, being Ash Wednesday, we will hear again the words the church has heard for centuries as we impose the ashes: "ashes to ashes and dust to dust." These words remind us that we are frail and flawed creatures, in need of repentance and dependent upon the grace of God. We come from God our creator and we return to God. Ash Wednesday begins Lent's invitation to look inward, examine our souls and our relationship to God.

Repentance is not just a feeling, like contrition. It is an act! It is action! It literally means "to turn, return." Repentance means to turn away from sin, and to turn toward God. Repentance first involves individual decisions that should eventually transform a

society. Repentance does have a communal nature to it. The prophets do speak of the failure of the nation to repent. And so, as one pastor asks, “What about our communal souls?” The prophets challenge us to consider our communal souls. What about the sins of a society? The last president to use the word “sin” in talking about our nation was Dwight Eisenhower. But we continue to sin. There is the threat of global warming, with its ecological and economic consequences. Terrorism and violence seems to be the preferred strategy to deal with religious, social, and political differences. Poverty, homelessness, and hunger continues to grow. The gap between the rich and the poor is ever-widening. These are communal sins that require a communal repentance.

The entire world has become so globally connected, enabled by all of the technology. You can get on your computer, and skype to someone on the other side the world—to see them and talk to them in real time. When Gina was in Africa, I was so surprised to hear how many of the people, especially those in the villages, have cell phones. I was reminded that there are no telephone lines to many of the villages, and the advent of the cellphone overcame that obstacle. The technology has helped third-world countries to be globally connected. The various free trade agreements have also contributed to the global connection. Such agreements make it possible for unrestricted purchase and sale of goods and services between countries without the imposition of constraints such as tariffs, duties and quotas. The United States has free trade agreements with 20 countries. And as Christians, we see ourselves as members of a global community for all of us are God’s people, not just Americans. The global connection is not only a reality, but it is who we are as Christians.

What happens here affects people everywhere, and what happens everywhere affects us here. What each and every one of us do here, affects our brothers and sisters around the globe. The consumerism of first world nations has created an ecological nightmare that is affecting all of the world. Our pollution affects others and their pollution affects us. The devastation of rain forests also contributes to global warming. Could not global warming be the plague of locusts that is an impending threat on our global community? Or the violence and greed of our times? Our inability to seek peace with our neighbors. Could the church today be called to be a modern-day Joel, crying out, "The Day of the Lord is near?"

Bill McKibben, naturalist and lay minister, has called the church to task on the issue of global warming in the February 20, 2017 issue of *The Christian Century*. "The church—which can still posit some goal for human life other than accumulation—must be involved in the search for what comes next." The church needs to "blow the trumpet," as Joel did. We need to call people to repentance, to change their ways. The church has been given a wake-up call through the prophets.

When Joel called for repentance, when he proclaimed his wake-up call, he quoted from Exodus, which reveals God's divine nature: "Gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." This is a classic example of divine forgiveness. To quote a pastor, "The good news of Lent is that the church is called to heed the trumpet call of repentance on ash Wednesday as we anticipate the glad trumpets of Easter morning announcing God's ultimate defeat of death in Christ Jesus. Repentance is our response to God's grace and mercy, to God's forgiveness.

Let every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.