

The Great and Terrible Day

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Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Pentecost XXI, October 24, 2004

Joel 2:23-32 NIV

Be glad, O people of Zion,
rejoice in the Lord your God,
for he has given you
the autumn rains in righteousness.
He sends you abundant showers,
both autumn and spring rains, as before.
The threshing floors will be filled with grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.
“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—
the great locust and the young locust,
the other locusts and the locust swarm —
my great army that I sent among you.
You will have plenty to eat, until you are full,
and you will praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has worked wonders for you;
never again will my people be shamed.
Then you will know that I am in Israel,
that I am the Lord your God,
and that there is no other;
never again will my people be shamed.
And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.
I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord .
And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved;
for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there will be deliverance,
as the Lord has said,
among the survivors
whom the Lord calls.”

Luke 18:9-14 NIV

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

*You crown the year with your bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance.
The grasslands of the desert overflow;*

*the hills are clothed with gladness.
The meadows are covered with flocks
and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy and sing (Psalm 65:11-13).*

I thought of this passage from Psalm 65 a few weeks ago as Shirley and I were driving through the countryside toward our new home in Kirkland. It was a golden autumn day and the broad, gently rolling fields of northern Illinois were at the point of being harvested. A cooler summer than in recent years, punctuated by strategic rainfall, has made this an especially good year for the crops. Already a dust cloud here and there marked the spot where a farmer was combining beans or cutting corn. I could not help but quote to Shirley the words of an anthem I had sung decades ago in a church choir, based on Psalm 65: "The valleys stand so thick with corn that they laugh and sing."

For the prophet Joel, in our reading for the twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, it was a far different story, with nothing to laugh or sing about. It had been anything but a good year. It seems a plague of locusts had come, devouring everything in its path, devastating the land. Joel compared the locusts to an invading army:

*For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and without number;
its teeth are lions' teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness.
It has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees;
it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;
their branches are made white.
Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth
for the bridegroom of her youth.
The cereal offering and the drink offering
are cut off from the house of the Lord.
The priests mourn, the ministers of the Lord.
The fields are laid waste, the ground mourns;
because the grain is destroyed,
the wine fails, the oil languishes (Joel 1:6-10)*

Sometimes, driving through rural areas, I have watched an airplane as it swooped low over the land and then turned and followed the contours of a field. It was not some crazy amateur pilot flirting with danger to impress his girl friend. It was a crop duster, spraying the field with chemicals to minimize any damage done by insects or other pestilence. In Joel's day there were no crop dusters, no insecticides, no chemicals to stave off a plague of locusts. When their army attacked there was nothing you could do but watch in horror as every plant was consumed and every tree stripped of its foliage, and even its bark, under their onslaught.

I had a brief taste of this while living in Texas several decades ago. We had a small garden next to our house that was attacked by squash bugs — a kind of large black beetle. We went to a garden center and the man told us how to get rid of them. "You take two small boards," he said, "and you pick up the bug and put it between the boards and then you smash them together. That will take care of the squash bug." That was all we could do — no sprays, no powders, nothing else would work.

With a million locusts advancing across your fields, even a couple of boards would be no help at all. The people of Judah were helpless to defend themselves. But the prophet Joel saw beyond the agricultural and entomological issues to a greater truth: The invading army of locusts was not just happenstance. It was a sign of the Lord's judgment against a people who had become careless about their devotion to him. Therefore, Joel called the people to repentance and prayer and a return to their God:

Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God; and cry to the Lord. Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes (Joel 1:14-15).

We don't like to think of bad things in our lives as coming from the Lord. Usually our response to bad events is to cry out to the Lord for help — and if that help doesn't come, then we begin to doubt God's goodness or even wonder if he is there, after all. A famous and brilliant British scientist, Stephen

Hawking, became an atheist because an illness in his early adult life left him totally paralyzed and even unable to speak except through a voice simulator that he can operate with a few fingers. When bad things happen to us, this could be our attitude as well — as if the very existence of the Almighty God, the Creator of the universe and its Sustainer through all time, depends on what happens to one human being in the twenty-first century — namely, *ME*.

The prophet Joel had a different take on disasters that occur. He saw them as a wake-up call from the Lord to bring us back to our reliance on him. God, if he is God, is in control of all events, even the bad things. We may wonder why he allows them, but we can't doubt his existence — nor his care for us — when they do occur. In fact, if we're true to Scripture we will never speak of *disasters*, because that word comes from a Greek expression that means "bad stars." As Christians we don't believe our lives are controlled by the stars, the signs of the Zodiac. So we don't talk about "disasters," nor do we "thank our lucky stars" when good things happen. It's the Lord God who is in charge — not the heavens which he, himself, has made — and when good things come to us we don't have a stroke of luck, we experience a *stroke of Providence*.

Joel saw the army of locusts as an army sent by the Lord to chastize his people, who had become casual about their dependence on him. When things go well for us, it's easy to forget God and think we are in control of our own lives. Prosperity, good health, the esteem of other people can blind us to our need for the Lord. Moses warned about this when he spoke to the people of Israel:

Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day: lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage . . . Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth; that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers, as at this day (Deuteronomy 8:11-14, 17-18).

So Joel understood how his people had forgotten about their covenant with God. In the face of a severe agricultural loss, he called for a fast — for repentance and a return to the Lord. And he saw through the Lord's judgment to the Lord's promise of better things to come:

*I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten —
the great locust and the young locust,
the other locusts and the locust swarm —
my great army that I sent among you (Joel 2:25).*

The Lord would restore the prosperity of his people. He would give them back what they had lost. Because of their repentance, he would have mercy on them and cancel out the effects of their sin. And there was even more to come. In the last day, after this time of devastation, the Lord would reveal his wonders in the heavens and on the earth. The "great and dreadful day" of the Lord would come — some translations call it the "great and terrible day" — in which God's people would call upon his name and be delivered. The Lord would pour out his Holy Spirit upon his people, both men and women. A new sense of God's greatness would dawn upon them in dreams and visions, in the release of prophecy, in a fresh awareness of God's presence among them.

Peter quoted this passage from Joel on the day of Pentecost, that day when the Holy Spirit first came upon the apostles and they spoke with other tongues and proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus Christ for the first time in Jerusalem.

*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.
I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below,*

blood and fire and billows of smoke.

The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood

before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Acts 2:17-21).

Notice that Peter called those days *the last days*. The deliverance God had promised his people had come to pass in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “Men of Israel,” Peter went on, “listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him” (Acts 2:22-24). God’s purpose had been fulfilled; Christ had overcome “the law of sin and death” that held his people in bondage, and had opened up the future to them. It was a new day, the birthday of the church. It was “the last days” of which Joel had spoken.

And notice, too, that in Peter’s quotation the “great and terrible day” has become the “great and glorious day.” That’s not so strange. In the Bible, God’s *glory* is a terrifying thing — that shining, radiant mass that surrounds his being is nothing to trifle with. Our God is an *awesome* God, and we may approach him only with fear and trembling. To behold him at work in our midst is an experience that should strike fear into our hearts. And God had surely been at work, doing signs and wonders through his Son. At his crucifixion the sky was darkened, the veil of the temple was torn, the graves of the saints were opened, and even a Roman centurion could not help but exclaim, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:45-54). And Jesus’ resurrection was no less fearsome; as Mark tells it, when the women came to his tomb early in the morning and found he wasn’t there, “they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).

What would have been your reaction to the news of Jesus’ resurrection if you had been among those who sent him to the cross? How would you have felt to learn, in Peter’s words, that therefore “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified”? It’s no wonder that Peter’s listeners were “cut to the heart,” as Luke says, and cried out almost in panic, “Brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:36-37). For those listeners, and all who responded that day of Pentecost to Peter’s call for repentance, it was indeed the “great and terrible day of the Lord.”

Yes, the “great and terrible day of the Lord” is the day Christ died, taking our sins upon his cross. The “great and glorious day of the Lord” is the day he rose again from the dead, defeating the powers of evil and opening the kingdom of heaven to all who believe in him. The “great and dreadful day of the Lord” is the day God pours out his Holy Spirit upon his own, men and women alike, equipping them for witness and service, raising up prophets to speak forth his Word, filling the old with dreams of the glory of his kingdom, filling the young with a vision for his work! “Your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions” (Joel 2:28). Call me a dreamer if you will — I guess I qualify, since I’m 65 — but I have a *vision* for a church that lives in the reality of that “great and terrible day of the Lord” and proclaims its message and its truth to a lost and needy world. I have a vision for a congregation filled with believers who are willing to rise up and stand for this truth: “For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Don’t be diverted into thinking of the “great and terrible day of the Lord” as something still to come, or something that will happen to somebody else. That’s not how Peter understood it on the day of Pentecost, when he quoted what Joel had to say. The “great and terrible day” is the day Jesus died on the cross for you and for me, taking upon himself the judgment of God against our sin. It’s the day the Son of man was “lifted up from the earth,” as John says, that he might draw all people unto himself (John 12:32). The “great and terrible day of the Lord” is the day Jesus Christ stretched out his hands between heaven and earth, broke the power of sin and death, tore the veil from the temple and made a way for us into the Father’s eternal presence.

And let’s not be diverted by thinking we can bypass this “great and terrible day of the Lord” by our religious pretense. Jesus tells a story about two men who prayed in the Temple. The Pharisee thought his

religious actions guaranteed him a place in the good graces of God, a place favored over other people. He forgot to pray with Psalm 65: “O thou who hearest prayer! To thee shall all flesh come on account of sins. When our transgressions prevail over us, thou dost forgive them” (Psalm 65:2-3). The tax collector came with a different attitude. He had no religious credentials with which to impress the Lord. But he must have heard the promise the Lord had given to the prophet Joel: “And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Joel 2:32). He responded out of a humble and contrite heart: “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” And, says Jesus, “this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God” (Luke 18:13-14).

The great and terrible day — the great and glorious day of the Lord — is the day you meet him at the cross of Jesus, and call upon him for his wholeness and salvation, and cry out from your heart, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It’s the day you let the Spirit of the risen Christ fall upon you, granting you the vision of God’s grace and goodness, and filling your mouth with his praise. For those who truly seek the Lord, it’s today and every day.

*Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion;
to you our vows will be fulfilled.
O you who hear prayer,
to you all men will come.
When we were overwhelmed by sins,
you forgave our transgressions.
Blessed are those you choose
and bring near to live in your courts!
We are filled with the good things of your house,
of your holy temple (Psalm 65:1-4).*

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