

February 17, 2021

Texts: Joel 2: 12-17, Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Title: "Restored to God"

Tonight we have two traditional passages for Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent. In our lesson from the prophet Joel, a disaster has come on the people of Israel in the form of an invasion of locusts. The damage that locusts can do is devastating. They can destroy everything that's green and in those days, it took years for them to recover. And when the crops were destroyed, animals died too and in some cases people starved to death.

The locust plagues we read about in Joel were something that had never happened in Israel before. The people were distraught. As was the tradition, they ripped their clothing in despair. *They wondered what they had done that God should send such devastation upon them.*

The Old Testament attitude toward suffering was all about people's sin. You do wrong and God would punish you. So if you were suffering, you must have offended God. Some people believe that even today. Someone I know just recently was questioning why God put him through such suffering as he had "lived a good life." It didn't seem fair.

Now, there's a bit of validity to some of this in that there are consequences for the things we bring on ourselves; diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol are sometimes the result of us not taking care of our health, for instance. If we're not nice to people, we won't have too many friends. Some of our sufferings aren't related to a particular behavior. A condition is genetic; it's inherited, for instance. Or we suffer on the highway because someone wasn't watching where they were going.

Now let's establish an important New Testament principle. **Bad times, whether illness or**

injury or any other disaster beyond our control, are not God's way of punishing us.

Jesus said it quite clearly, “[God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). He could have said, “God allows locusts to invade good nations and bad nations and God allows dandelions to grow in the lawns of good neighbors and bad neighbors.” That’s just the way things are in this world.

The prophet Joel couldn’t understand suffering either, but he was right in that he wanted the people to understand there was a better way to show God their desire for forgiveness than tearing their clothes. He writes, “‘Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love...’”

Times of suffering are not times of punishment for our sin. However, to the extent that we’re in a sinful state, we cut ourselves off from God’s healing power and that, is a tragedy. Because God’s desire is always to heal and to strengthen us in our time of need. When we turn our backs to God, we deny ourselves the power for living that only God can provide. The prophet Joel is asking the people to look within their hearts to see if there might be anything getting in the way from experiencing God’s grace and healing love.

As we mark our foreheads with ashes we are asking God to cleanse us of anything that’s preventing His perfect will from being done in our lives. We are His people and we miss the mark, all of us do. The season of Lent is a good time to pray to be restored to the kind of relationship with Him that allows us to live with hope despite the burdens of living in a fallen world. Amen.

