

*A sermon preached by The Reverend Canon Dr. David J. Anderson on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, October 23, 2022, at St. Jude's Church, Oakville. (Joel 2.23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18; Luke 18.9-14)*

I speak to you in the name of The Most Holy and Blessed Trinity. Amen.

I was recently speaking with a friend who lives in Minneapolis about the struggles he and his wife are having with their son who is a sophomore in high school. The young man suffers from anxiety, which if you are not aware, is a severe pandemic among young people across North America these days. My friend was telling me that almost every evening as their son goes to bed, he becomes very anxious about the next day at school and how he will survive a school shooting should one occur. It was heartbreaking to hear about the young man's suffering.

The young man has a plan. He's making friends with kids at school who might seem to be lonely and trying his best to contribute positively to the mental health of his classmates. It seems like they mostly all want to look out for each other. But he also has a plan in case someone starts shooting. He will throw a chair if someone is coming at him. He will crawl to safety. He will play dead if it comes to that. His mom and dad do their best to reassure him, but are devastated that their son feels the need to worry so about such things.

But what can they do? They can't really say, "don't worry," or "you will be safe at school." None of that will help because their son knows they can't promise that.

I suspect that many of our who are a little older feel for the younger generations. We know all of the pressures and temptations facing our kids in high school. He know that our young adults face a difficult future with housing prices out of reach for many of them for the foreseeable future. We know that the anxieties that our young people carry concerning the threat of global climate catastrophe is real, especially as real climate action is delayed and delayed.

We all wish there was something that we could do to lift some of that anxiety. And, of course, there are actions we can take, but many of the substantive changes needed require a level of political will beyond our own personal agency. We can, of course, keep these concerns at the forefront of our minds as we go to the polls in local elections tomorrow.

An agricultural plague of locusts can devastated a land and its people for generations, and this still happens all over the world, so that what we read about in our First Reading is not just a metaphor. These are real threats faced today by our global neighbours. But even the Prophet Joel many have been using the devastation wrought by locusts as a kind of metaphor, a stand in for any number of the threats that we faced by the people of Judah in his own day.

Winston Churchill brought the phrase, "the years the locust has eaten," into common usage in the 1930s. He was speaking about the period in which Britain failed to rearm following the First World War despite Germany doing so, as "the locust years." Nowadays, the term is often used personally; people refer to difficult periods of their lives—perhaps a period of illness or relationship breakdown—as the locust years.

Actual locust swarms are as frightening as they are devastating. When the swarm arrives the can darken the entire sky and can be seen coming from a distance at high speed. One swarm can be as large as a hundred miles in diameter, containing as much as a hundred billion locusts, which each eat their own weight in grain every day.

All of today's readings speak to the theme of a promised future of divine turn around. Despite what might happen in the locust years, God's promise is for a future of human and creational flourishing. This promise is rooted in God's own very nature, the God of love, "whose property it is always to have mercy" (BCP, Prayer of Humble Access). So it is that our Gospel Reading speaks about God's great reversal, "for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Lk 18.14). So it is that the Apostle Paul can say, in our Second Reading, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom" (2Ti 4.18).

So it is that the Prophet Joel also announces a turn. In the place of the wasteland left behind by the locust, there is a new creation. The drought gives way to rain (v.23). Grain, wine, and oil—these gifts of God loaded with sacramental meaning for creation and redemptions—abound; God's gives the fruits of the earth in abundance. This abundance has a purpose, Joel explains: The people will know that I am in the midst of them, "I, the LORD, am your God and there is not other. And my people shall never again be put to shame" (v.27).

In the Book of Genesis' creation story the breath of God brought forth life. Creation flourished and brought forth an abundance. The prophet Joel here announces that there will be a further exhalation of the divine breath and a fresh harvest of the fruit of the Spirit:

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. (2.28-29)  
Joel looks forward to the time when the gifts of the Spirit will be in abundance among God's people: sons and daughters, young and old, will dream dreams and see visions, along with slaves as well. The divine gift will be inclusive of all.

In light of the way that Peter quotes this passage from Joel in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, as recorded in the Book of Acts, we see this promise fulfilled—or further fulfilled—in the outpouring of the Spirit on that day and ever since. Certainly, the gifts becomes more inclusive as the Spirit is poured out on all flesh.

*All* flesh receives the gift. That is the promise. A promise to all humanity. The inclusivity of the promise is stressed: "*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v.32a).

This past week Canada's finance minister delivered a speech that could be described as a little apocalypse. She told us that difficult economic times lay ahead. I suspect most of us have seen this coming for a while. We have also known, however, that even in the midst of better times many of our neighbours have been left behind. Our many food programs as a parish seek to alleviate the worst of this and will become even more important in the months ahead.

But here is the thing. Lest we lose all perspective, the prophet Joel reminds us that the locusts do not have the last word. Bad things are happening and they will happen, but they will not last. We are to be fed, not destroyed, Joel tells us.

One of the things that both Joel and Paul help us with this morning is the question of how we should live in the midst of a dark time. We can easily fixate on all that is wrong and grow in our fear for the future. We can focus on our tragic interpretations. But Joel and Paul point to another way and encourage us to retrain our vision so that we can see the light breaking in. We desperately need a vision of hope for the future, especially in the midst of difficult times.

If we don't turn towards some hope in our ability to work together as a society we are unlikely to find common ground. If we don't turn towards some hope in the future of our environment, we are likely to destroy the planet. But imagine what will happen if we can grow enchanted again with the world that God has made and the potential for human and creational flourishing, rather than remaining habitually disenchanting with it and with ourselves. It's a world of difference!

In the midst of the deep and distressing challenges any of us may face personally, or the societal crises we face collectively, any of us might be tempted to throw up our hands. It is precisely as such a time, however, that even our little actions become more important and meaningful. We might choose to walk rather than take the car on a short trip, because it gives us the opportunity to put into practice an act of hope. Whether we are doing our recycling at home, or volunteering at the food bank, or serving a meal at a homeless shelter, or caring for a sick relative or friend, or brightening the day of someone who is lonely—all these small acts can be ways in which we ritualize our hope. They can be a form of political and social liturgy that reminds us that God has a better future for us. These little acts form us as we participate in what God is doing to bring us that better future.

So, what do we do in the face of the challenges we face. We continue to act with love and hope.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.