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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“SWARM”**  
**Joel 1:1-14**

Do you clearly recall what happened a year ago this Tuesday, January 20, 2015? I don't.

What stands out about December 9, 2008? That Tuesday doesn't ring a bell for me.

Tuesday, April 27, 2004? I've got nothing.

How about Tuesday, September 11th, 2001? I can still see the column of smoke rising from the World Trade Center, still see the gaping hole in the Pentagon, still see the wreckage in that Pennsylvania field.

- The words of Joel 1:2 are apropos:

**Hear this, you elders;  
listen, all who live in the land.  
Has anything like this ever happened in  
your days  
or in the days of your ancestors?**

Some of us had already lived through awful times long before the terrorists attacked: World War II, Korea, and Vietnam; genocide in Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda; assassinations; terrible natural disasters; and so forth.

But 9/11 was different. Nothing like it had ever happened – not to U.S. citizens, on our soil, at this scale. The impact was far greater than the number of casualties would suggest. Those attacks changed the world.

- Please turn with me to Joel 1:1-14.

Israel is reeling from a plague of locusts. It is a calamity of unprecedented magnitude.

Keep in mind that this is an agrarian culture. Crops and livestock are the footing on which the whole society stands.

Ancient Israel does well for itself, all things considered. Still, they have no insecticides, no biological control agents, no refrigeration, no means of stockpiling grain, and no sophisticated transportation networks for bringing food in from the outside.

So when locusts swarm, people starve to death. It is an ugly fact of life in the ancient world.

But that is not all. If the swarm is much larger than usual, or if it coincides with other unfavorable conditions, it can end an entire civilization.

- This fearsome swarm is exceptionally large. Verses 6 and 7:

**A nation has invaded my land,  
a mighty army *without number*;  
it has the teeth of a lion,  
the fangs of a lioness.**

- The horde is so vast and so densely packed, and its onslaught so inexorable, that from a distance it resembles a wave breaking on the shore or a fire advancing over the horizon. As Joel puts it in 2:2,

**Like dawn spreading across the mountains,  
a large and mighty army comes,  
such as never was of old  
nor ever will be in ages to come.**

☑ {Showler} **“A large swarm can consist of billions”** or trillions of individuals **“spread out over... thousands of square [miles], with a [density] of up to... two hundred million per square mile.”**

In 1875 a swarm covered an area in the west larger than California. Entomologists estimate that it included around 12.5 trillion insects, and weighed 27.5 million tons.

Between 1966 and 1969 a plague of up to thirty billion infested parts of the Middle East. At their maximum expansion they blanketed 39,000 square miles of space.

☑ By way of comparison the modern state of Israel is only 8,552 square miles, including the disputed territories. The whole nation could be overlaid many times over.

■ This insect army is voracious, insatiable even.

Verse 7:

**It has laid waste my vines  
and ruined my fig trees.  
It has stripped off their bark  
and thrown it away,  
leaving their branches white.**

That is the kind of desolation wreaked by locusts.

☑ Consider this sixteenth century eyewitness account:

**They began to arrive...about the hour of [nine],  
and till night they did not cease.... Next day at ...  
[six] they began to depart, and at midday there  
was not one there, and not a leaf remained upon  
a tree. At that moment others began to arrive,  
and they remained like the others till the next  
day at the same hour; and these did not leave**

**any corn with a husk nor a green blade. In  
this way they did for five days one after the  
other.**

?! Someone might say, ‘That’s all very interesting. But what does it have to do with us or 9/11?’

At first glance, nothing. Al-Qaeda was driven by fanatical malice; the insects by physical hunger. The terrorists targeted buildings; the locusts targeted vegetation. Our enemies murdered 3,000 in under two hours by crashing planes; the swarm may have taken many times that but slowly, by starvation.

But if we go deeper, we might discover that the events of Joel resonate powerfully with us. Our sixteenth century eyewitness hints at one point of connection: these invaders come in multiple waves.

The first wave consumed vast quantities of life. The next morning, they moved forward.

The second wave stripped the trees bare. Then they moved on.

The third wave finished devouring the grain. The next day they advanced forward.

These were followed by a fourth wave, then a fifth. Not only was the damage inflicted by any given wave horrific; with the exception of the last, each was a harbinger of further devastation yet to come.

■ Joel puts it succinctly in **verse 4:**

**What the locust swarm has left  
the great locusts have eaten;  
what the great locusts have left  
the young locusts have eaten;**

**what the young locusts have left  
other locusts have eaten.**

■ Imagine the impact on families, communities, and the nation! With each additional wave of invaders material loss escalates, the future gets bleaker, and human frustration, anxiety, sorrow, and despair intensify.

‡ Don't the repetitive, accumulative lines of verse four encapsulate our national experience since 9/11?

**What al-Qaeda has left  
our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have  
eaten;  
what our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have left  
our greed, bigotry, and pride have eaten;  
what our greed, bigotry, and pride have left  
ISIS and similar extremists are eating.**

The locusts of terrorism, warfare, injustice, myriad “-isms,” and pride plagued us long before September 11<sup>th</sup>. Nevertheless, the attacks brought them to the surface and strengthened them.

■ It's been wave after wave of trouble ever since. Some are imposed on us by outside enemies; many are of our own making. The upshot is that

**the people's joy  
is withered away” (verse 12).**

‡ Isn't this true of many U.S. Americans? Haven't these feelings crept into much of the church?

Lord, have mercy! We need your salvation as desperately as Israel did in the days of Joel.

What does your prophet say to us in our need?

✈ First, Joel says “Lament before the LORD.”

■ Verse 5:

**Wake up, you drunkards, and weep!  
Wail, all you drinkers of wine...**

■ Verse 8:

**Mourn like a virgin in sackcloth  
grieving for the betrothed of her youth.**

■ Verse 11:

**Despair, you farmers,  
wail, you vine growers...**

■ And verse 13:

**Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn;  
wail, you who minister before the altar.  
Come, spend the night in sackcloth,  
you who minister before my God...**

Mourn the lives lost on every side. Grieve for minds warped by fear and hatred. Feel sad for survivors whose bodies are disfigured by bombs and bullets. Be distressed by the sins committed against us, and even more by the sins we have committed against others. Suffer the anguish God suffers at humankind's self-inflicted wounds.

Lament for ourselves helps us deal with reality and demolishes the myth of self-sufficiency. Lament for others, above all our enemies, empowers us for

attitudes and acts of humility, compassion, mercy, and αγάπη [agapē] love.

✎ Second, Joel says “Pray to the LORD.”

■ Verse 14:

**Declare a holy fast;  
call a sacred assembly.  
Summon the elders  
and all who live in the land  
to the house of the LORD your God,  
and cry out to the LORD.**

Pray alone and together.

Pray with words and with silences.

Pray humbly, because our brightest minds and boldest solutions are not enough. Pray confidently, because the Triune God is more than enough.

Pray repentantly, for we have not loved the LORD with our whole being and others as ourselves. Pray hopefully, for God is calling us (even us!) to bring forth his kingdom of peace, justice and love!

Prayer enthrones the Father, Son, and H.S. It realigns our hearts and minds, centering us on him. It opens us to receive his blessings, best of all his own *presence*. Prayer equips to cooperate with God, even when the divine will conflicts with our natural desires.

★ There are two crucial caveats. First, lament and prayer are not a magic formula. Sovereign God is not obligated to do our bidding. As Joel says in 2:14, “**Who knows? He may turn and relent...**”

★ Second, Israel had a sacred covenant with God which endowed them with unique responsibilities and privileges. The United States has never been in covenant with YHWH. This fact must inform our understanding of our text.

{Heb 4:12; 2 Ti 3:16-17} Having said that, the Book of Joel “**is alive and active**” here and now, for it is “**the word of God.**” Like “**All Scripture**” it “**is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**”

And so the call to lament and to pray extends to us.

‽ Whom shall we trust in times of trouble, if not the Living God? Ourselves? We have seen where that leads us!

‽ To whom shall we turn when the locusts swarm, if not to the One whose Son suffered death to save us? There is no one else!

Joel 1:1-14 is the Word of the Lord.