

A Swarm of Locusts

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On October 19 we remember the Prophet Joel, who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah.

We know little about this prophet, except that he was the son of Pethuel, as the first verse of his book tells us. Scholars are even divided on the time in which he lived and wrote, though it was sometime during the 8th to 6th centuries BC.

Joel begins his prophecy by describing something that actually occurred—an invasion by hordes of locusts which overran the land. He writes: "What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten" (1:4).

Joel describes these invaders as charging warriors who march without swerving from their paths or jostling each other. They "leap upon the city, they run upon the walls, they climb up into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief" (2: 7-10a).

The effects of this attack are devastating. Writing in the first person, Joel describes the locusts as a "nation" that has come up against "my land" and with its fangs like those 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" (1: 7).

Joel views this frightening, destructive event as a judgment from God. As one who must speak God's word to the people, the prophet can only sorrowfully call on them to repent. He extends his call to the entire community, including the priests and "ministers of the Lord." He emphasizes that all must repent because all are being harmed, including the animals: "How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep are dismayed" (1: 18).

But like other prophets, Joel also has hopeful and loving words to impart to the people. He records the Lord's promise that they can return to their God with fasting, mourning and weeping, rending their hearts rather than their garments. In the familiar words of Psalm 86, he reminds them that the Lord is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

On the day of Pentecost, Peter quotes Joel's prophecy that God will restore the land and that He will "pour out My spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days I will pour out my spirit" (2: 28c-29).

Kontakion - Tone 4

Illumined by the Spirit, your heart was a vessel of illustrious prophecy, seeing far-off things as though they were present. Therefore, we venerate you, glorious prophet Joel.

This prophecy is notable in that it includes both women and men as those who will prophesy. Peter alters it in one way, however. He says that it will take place "in the last days" (Acts 2: 17). It has, on Pentecost, become a message not only for the Jews of Joel's time, but for all those who follow Christ and await the true "day of the Lord."