

Message: Joel 1/2 Text: 1:1-12, 2:23-26

Introduction:

So. We're in the Minor Prophets. We've had some introduction to these books, we talked last week about Obadiah, and where he fits in the timeline of these Prophetic books. Obadiah, like Joel, brings up a question of timing: When was this book actually written? We'll talk about Joel's book soon, but I suggested that we best fit Obadiah around 586 BC, when Jerusalem was destroyed and the last of the Israelites sent into Exile in Babylon.

Friends! My hopes for today are the same as they were last week: That we understand Joel when we're through with this message and with next week's, too. We're spending two weeks talking about Joel; the messages will flow into each other, thematically at least. Today we'll get a broad view of this book, and hint at things we should explore more on our own if we want to.

Next week we'll talk especially about the way Joel is used in the New Testament, because it is, honestly, one of the more important Minor Prophets in the Early Church's life. We'll spend a lot of time focusing on a particular prophecy of the future that God promises through Joel, and how that is realized in us, in the Church, the Body of the Messiah on earth.

Today, we're talking about Joel broadly. And there are things to say about this book that bears his name. First, let's pray.

Prayer:

Dating: ~850 BC or ~538-330 BC

To talk about when Joel might have written, we have to talk about what he wrote. This is true of every Minor Prophet, but more true of Joel, and Obadiah last week, than any of the others.

Two major options present themselves: Either Joel was written around 850 BC, nearly the first Minor Prophet, or Joel was written sometime while Judah--all that was left of Israel--was given relative autonomy under the Persian Empire, who had restored them to Jerusalem. That lasted from around 538 to 330 BC.

I think, by the time we're done this morning, we'll have a strong sense of when this was most likely written. It'll be a suggestion; we can't know for sure, but I think we can make wise guesses. And it's not the most important thing to know, right? But starting with this question of "When?" forces us to take a close look at what's going on in Joel to answer it, and a close look at Joel is what I want for us. So it's kind of the perfect way to start a message, you know? So let's talk about Joel.

Lets start with Joel's quirks. The things that give him his, oh,

personality.

Quirks: Very Agricultural

In Joel we see significant agricultural language and agricultural concerns, agricultural workers and industry specially addressed. Now: This makes sense in an agrarian world, right? But Joel's emphasis is more so than others. There even seems to be specialized agricultural language. When Joel describes "cutting" locusts and "swarming" locusts and "hopping" locusts and "destroying" locusts, as the NRSV puts it, any other translation can put it any way they want, because no one's really sure what the descriptions of locusts are. Maybe the Ancient Near East had as many words for locusts as Eskimo have for snow. Maybe some lonely grad student somewhere knows, as they furiously pound out their dissertation about it; for scholarship everywhere, we'll hope they tweet it out, because it's just a lot of locust.

Quirks: Prophetic Mash-Up

One of the things Joel does is present a sort of prophetic mash up of stuff we see throughout the Minor (and Major) prophets. Joel alludes to a northern threat, which is something that shows up in Jeremiah 4 through 6, and the image of what it's like when that enemy shows up are similar. Things Joel declares show up, very nearly word for word, in other prophets: Isaiah, Amos, Obadiah. We see in Joel almost every prophetic sub-genre you can find: oracles

of woe, oracles of salvation, calls for repentance, cases made against enemies.

None of this helps when we've got to figure out a date, really. Is Joel inspired by what others have said, and borrowing their language and forms to communicate what God wants to say? So we argue for a more recent date? Or is Joel the first out of the gate, inspiring others, so an earlier, later, date makes sense? I dunno; persuade me.

Joel also leans into the "Day of the Lord" tradition, which shows up in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Malachi. That's worth it's own mention.

Quirks: Day of the Lord

At its most basic, this "Day of the Lord" is a period of time--envisioned as a moment, an event--maybe a day--when God shows up and doles out judgment and reward. That's what it is at its simplest: God shows up, and doles out judgment or reward, makes good on His promises to Israel, sets the world right--which, for most Israelites meant restoring their fortunate place in the world.

It's language we're familiar with, too. When Jesus showed up on the scene, most Jews--apart from the few really committed to the establishment and really wanting to hang onto their source of power, the Temple--were heavy into expecting God to show up at their watch. The "Day of the

Lord” had become wrapped up in the idea that this would be ushered in by the Messiah, God’s special anointed one, who would do all the Day of the Lord stuff.

The expectation that God’s Messiah would show up was talked about more and more often as the Old Testament comes to a close, and we can’t read the Minor Prophets and ignore the “Day of the Lord” expectation, even if the Messianic one isn’t as much in play for some of them.

What we talked about when we were in Matthew was the way in which Jesus wrapped this Day of the Lord language around himself, and what we discovered is that somehow, in Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Day of the Lord had begun, had dawned, but that we ourselves are still waiting for its evening to come, for the time when God will completely make good on his promises. We're living in the middle of it, in some real ways.

Joel had no expectation of this AT ALL. None of the Minor Prophets who look forward to this time of recompense, of reward, or punishing judgment, expected it to go down the way the early Church realized it went down in Jesus. Even the early Church didn’t get this at first.

So when we see Joel talking about the “Day of the Lord,” he fundamentally has an incomplete picture of what he’s talking about. He doesn’t know what he doesn’t know, because God

hasn't revealed it to His People yet. We have to keep this in mind.

Framing Joel: Three Movements

Let me offer us an outline of Joel, because outlines matter. They help us get a sense of the book in our heads, so we can hold onto the whole thing. I like this one:

1:1-20: First Movement: Just Recently? Now?

I. Swarm/Horde

II. Lamentations

III. Call on Priests to call on People to Repent

IV. Small Prayer

2:1-27: Second Movement: Now? Really soon?

I. Swarm/Horde

II. Call on People & Priests

III. God's Reversal of Devastation

2:28-3:21: Third Movement: To Come Sometime

I. Signs (Spirit, Heaven, & Earth)

II. Sins of Nations

III. Judgment Against Nations

IV. Blessings For Judah

So. Let's race through these things:

Ridiculously Thin, Fast, Review: 1st Movement

In Joel's First Movement, First Act, Joel introduces himself. He's Pethuel's son, whoever that guy is; it gives us no special insight. He declares "the Lord's word," and it starts as a description of some terrible horde or swarm that's coming upon the land. It's very clearly locusts, but the swarm is also called, at one point, "a nation." This swarm shocks everyone: wine-drinkers and winos, priests and altar-deacons, farmers and vinedressers are all told to grieve like a fiancée whose betrothed just died. The Priests are told to lead the people in a ceremonial repentance, right before we learn that it's not just the locusts ravaging things, but there's also a drought in play, and Joel himself prays to God because a fire has followed the drought. Locusts, drought, and fire have washed over the place, and we read.

"What a terrible day! The day of the Lord is near; it comes like chaos from the Almighty." But we realize that this description of locust, drought, and fire isn't the "real" Day of the Lord, not as we think of it. It's a teaser, a preview.

Ridiculously Thin, Fast, Review: 2nd Movement

The Second Movement opens with a call that the People of the land tremble, "because the day of the Lord is coming. It is near--a day of darkness and no light, a day of clouds and thick darkness." And there's a description of a second horde, one that's described as "a great and powerful people" and also this way:

“They resemble horses, and like warhorses they charge, like the rumbling of chariots. They leap on the mountaintops--like the crackling of a fire’s flame, devouring the stubble; like a powerful army ready for battle.” It’s terrible. “The earthquakes before them; the heavens shake. The sun and the moon are darkened; the stars have stopped shining, because the Lord utters his voice at the head of his army. How numerous are his troops. Mighty are those who obey his word. The day of the Lord is great; it stirs up great fear--who can endure it?”

And we have questions that we can’t easily answer, which there simply is no agreement on. Is this a revisioning of what we just read? Is this a description of that same locust swarm that we just saw, now imagined as “the Lord’s army?”

Because what we realize is this “army of the lord,” as it’s described, this “host,” *isn’t* an army, it is “like” one. Joel makes that point over and over. A locust swarm, if it did anything, blocked out the sun, would “leave behind them a barren wasteland,” as Joel puts it. Was the first series of natural disasters--locusts, drought, and fire--simply a precursor to a very real invasion from a northern enemy, and so it serves as the perfect metaphor? Or is Joel describing a second, worse locust invasion? I don’t know for sure; I’ll tell you what I think in a second.

This Second Movement continues, though, with a long call

God gives for the People and the Priests to repent.

“Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow; tear your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive.” This call for a heartfelt repentance is followed by a call for a ceremonial, religious one: “Blow the horn in Zion; demand a fast; request a special assembly. Gather the people; prepare a holy meeting...”

And God responds to this powerful personal and institutional, heartfelt and religious display of repentance.

“I’m sending you the corn, new wine, and fresh oil, and you’ll be fully satisfied by it...Don’t be afraid, animals of the field, for the meadows of the wilderness will turn green; the tree will bear its fruit; the fig tree and grapevine will give their full yield...the Lord your God...will give you the early rain as a sign of righteousness; he will pour down abundant rain for you...”

God promises: “I will remove the northern army far from you and drive it into a dried-up and desolate land, its front into the eastern sea, and its rear into the western sea. Its stench will rise up; its stink will come to the surface.”

Second Movement: Covenant is Context

So, Let me just reveal my cards. I think God isn't talking, here, about piling up dead bodies, at least not human ones. I think God's talking about piles of stinky, dead grasshoppers, which in times of drought multiply like crazy and cloud out the sun.

I do think what Joel is describing, in both the First Movement and in this Second Movement, is a series of what we'd call natural disasters: Locusts, Drought, Fire. It's "Day of the Lord" stuff because it is, as far as Joel is concerned, who is speaking for God, judgment-related. These aren't accidental, "natural," in Joel's eyes, and God doesn't want Israel to think that they are. They are judgments against Israel.

And we have hints of this when God talks about giving the people "early rain as a sign of righteousness" and the way God is "full of faithful love, and ready to forgive." Because "righteousness" and "faithful love" are covenant language. Joel pleads that God would intervene, because His People, "your inheritance," Joel says, will be "a disgrace, an example of failure among the nations" if God doesn't intervene.

And all this points us back to God's covenant promises that he made with the Israelites. We talked, at the beginning of this series, about the way God's covenant relationship with Israel demanded covenant faithfulness on both parties, "righteousness" from God and from Israel both, and how-- and Leviticus 26 talks about this--if Israel turns away from

their covenant obligations they'll be let go, God's blessing on them will lift, and terrible things will happen to them, including the agricultural devastation of what they experience in Joel. And for a people who were formed as a result of being set free from slavery in part by a plague of Locusts, the fact that a locust plague has just come on them should be a double reminder to pay attention to what God is trying to communicate.

Leviticus promises, too, that all God's People have to do is repent and return to him to have their covenant blessings restored and their role as God's special inheritance, special People, in the world restored.

In the Second Movement, this is what's happening. God hears them, sees their personal and collective heartfelt and religious repentance, and responds just as he promised through Abraham: "if their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they make up for their guilt, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob...with Isaac...with Abraham. And I will remember the land." God blows away the Locusts, and brings the rain, because Israel finally returned to Him, and kept their marriage vows, their covenant promises, to Him.

But all this activity in the First and Second Movement sets us up for the third:

Ridiculously Thin, Fast, Review: 3rd Movement

And this Third Movement isn't about something "like" a battle and invading armies. It's about a battle proper...just one in which nobody fights.

Joel starts this Third Movement by tossing us into the future:

"After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone," Joel begins. And the "After that," even in this moment, doesn't read as an "immediately after that," but feels further down the line. We know it is, as Christians.

God promises signs that the "real" Day of the Lord is truly at hand.

"I will pour out my spirit on everyone," God declares through Joel. And we'll talk more about this passage next week. "I will give signs in the heavens and on the earth--blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes." It's a description of smoke, of fires that have so completely burned up an area, they darken the sky and paint the moon red. "But everyone who calls on the Lord's name will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be security..."

Now. The New Testament leans into these verses, sees them through Messiah Jesus, and understands them to mean all

sorts of things we'll discuss more next week. But Joel continues. He says "I will bring back to Judah and Jerusalem those who were sent away." And not just His People, but "I will gather all the nations, and I will bring them to the Jehoshaphat Valley. There I will enter into judgment with them in support of my people and my possession, Israel, which they have scattered among the nations."

Third Movement: Jehoshaphat Valley

The reference to the Jehoshaphat Valley is likely a reference to something that I didn't say last week, but did put in our bulletins. Jehoshaphat was a ruler of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, while there was still a Northern One, around, say 870 to 850 BC. And in 2 Chronicles 20 we read about a time when Moab, Ammon, and Edom gathered to fight Judah. Jehoshaphat, who was more or less a good king, prays at the Temple for the kingdom, ending his prayer with "We don't know what to do and so we're looking to you for help!" In response, the Spirit of God comes upon a priest's son, who prophesies:

"Don't be afraid or discouraged by this great army because the battle isn't yours. It belongs to God! March out against them tomorrow. Since they will be coming through the Ziz pass, meet them at the end of the valley that opens into the Jeruel wilderness. You don't need to fight this battle. Just take your places, stand ready, and watch how the Lord, who is with

you, will deliver you, Judah and Jerusalem. Don't be afraid or discouraged! Go out tomorrow and face them."

They go out. They play music. Jehoshaphat says, "Trust God's Prophets and you'll succeed!" The three armies end up fighting against each other, kill each other instead, and there are no survivors. Judah shows up after it's over.

So: Here is where our major argument for an earlier date comes from. Joel is describing that battle. That's the argument, when it's made. And it's a tidy argument, because it solves a problem for us that we'll talk about in a second. But I don't buy it. First of all, Joel isn't mentioned at all in the story, and it just seems like he would be, you know?

Secondly, Joel gets really, really particular all of a sudden in this Third Movement, in a way we haven't seen before. We've seen reference to Zion, to the Temple by way of talking about priests and offerings. But now Joel talks about Judah and Jerusalem, he talks about Tyre and Sidon and the regions of Philistia. He says to them "You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks" and he makes mention of the "Sabeans," which were a Semitic people who lived in the Southern part of Saudi Arabia.

If we only had this Third Movement, the very language Joel uses would automatically assign a recent date to this book.

He mentions Greeks, you know? They weren't around in 850.

And while you could argue, oh, "It's because he's a prophet and he's prophesying the future!" that argument ignores the fact that Joel isn't, here, prophesying about the existence of future nations, he's just describing what has been done to Judah and Jerusalem that existing nations will be judged for. And to mention Tyre and Sidon without mentioning the Northern Kingdom, Israel, would be super weird...unless there is no Northern Kingdom anymore. Beyond all this, there's no reason to assume that Judah would have forgotten this awesome miracle God did in the Valley, which was renamed, during the past 300 years, the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

Third Movement: Earlier Date Camp

So. I'm in the Earlier Date camp. Because of the content. But it can pose a problem for us, if we let it, because the Third Movement describes a great battle in this Valley, one that I'm suggesting wasn't way back during Jehoshaphat's reign...but also, as far as we know, hasn't happened.

Joel declares the opposite of something Isaiah says. Isaiah promises a day of peace, when God's people won't have to worry about violence and won't act with it, and will turn their weapons of war into garden implements. Here, God is speaking to the Nations, saying "Beat the iron tips of your plows into swords and your pruning tools into spears, let the

weaking say, 'I'm mighty!' Let the nations prepare themselves and come up to the Jehoshaphat Valley; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Cut with the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go and crush grapes, for the winepress is full. The jars overflow with wine, for their wickedness is great. Crowd after crowd fills the valley of judgment, for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of judgment. The sun and the moon are darkened; the stars have ceased shining."

I didn't mention, yet, that Jehoshaphat means "Yahweh Judges" or "Yahweh will Judge." So the valley name could legitimately be only symbolic. And in fact, the entire idea that this is an event that will take place in an actual place--the Valley of Jehoshaphat--could be simply a metaphor for what will happen to the Nations who antagonize God on the Day of the Lord. It's the same promise Jesus made to us in Matthew.

See, Joel could very easily be doing this: Simply saying that in the Day of the Lord, God will judge these nations who've acted against his possession, His People. Joel is making reference to the Valley of Jehoshaphat because it's a reminder that God is the one who Judges and it's a reminder of what happened at that valley hundreds of years before: Without any violence on the part of His People, all their enemies, and God's enemies, died. And by inverting Isaiah's promise that the future will hold peace, and swords will be

beaten into plowshares, Joel is highlighting just how screwed up these Nations get about what the future is going to hold.

I suggest this, because it's what I think Joel is doing. Others don't. There are entire denominations of Christians waiting for a future global war that they believe will start in a Valley not that far from Jerusalem, which has been identified as the actual valley where God performed the miracle of 2 Chronicles 20. I'm just not in that camp. I think Joel is giving us a powerful, complex promise that the people who oppose him, and act violently, and miss the peace he's setting His People up for, will instead discover his judgment, not their triumph. The battle itself is metaphor.

What Joel Seems To Be Doing:

But that doesn't mean I think that this battle has already happened, and Joel is all about something from 850 BC. I think Joel is lifting up the events of 2 Chronicles 20, adding in Day of the Lord assumptions and remixing some other prophets to communicate that the Day of Judgment will come. I just believe it dawned in the Messiah's resurrection; Joel didn't expect that, but he and us this morning are both waiting for the evening to come.

Summary and Conclusion:

So until next week, here's what we have with Joel. Israel was meant to live up to covenant obligations that it had neglected or rejected or broke somehow. And Joel, writing to

Judah sometime after their return from Exile into Babylon, after the Temple has been rebuilt, is calling God's People to remember their obligations, and uphold them. To repent, and to repent in a heartfelt, religious, personal and collective way. They do. And God blesses them for it.

But they need to hear this future promise, too, that God's antagonists will be judged because even after their repentance, they are harried and hassled by the neighboring countries, by Tyre and Sidon especially, still under Persia's thumb, and God wants Israel--now simply Judah--to know that this will end. God hasn't forgotten His covenant obligations to them, and God will come through for them just like he did when he restored them not so long ago, after the locusts, the drought, and the fires devastated them. That future "Day of the Lord" is coming, and they need to hold on for it.

And we need to hold on for it, too.

We need to remember that God will judge evil.

I think in particular, we need to remember that it's the nations who lie to themselves, who say, in their weakness, "I'm mighty!" It's the nations who beat their implements of creation care, plows and pruners, into weapons of violence. It's the nations who so clearly reject God's right to judge, and who who find themselves trapped in the Valley called "God

Judges You,” and who will, if Ancient Israelite history is a guide, rip themselves apart. We don’t want to be on that side. We don’t want to be on that self-deluded, violent side.

We’re the ones who live in the morning light of the Day of the Lord, and who are meant to live for Christ until it’s evening, until his return, and that judgment on all nations, on all people, happens.

Our loyalties can’t be national or ethnic loyalty, so deeply concerned for Tyre or Sidon that we reject Judah, or so deeply concerned for Israel that we neglect the Church, which is made up of all tribes, nations, and people. If we discover ourselves being manipulated into violence, we have to be careful that we’re not being tricked into acting like the nations as Joel describes them.

We have to wonder if we’re lying to ourselves about our real capacity, and trusting in our mightiness and weapons, like Joel describes the nations doing, instead of trusting in the God who judges and in His promise to see us through past the troubles that anyone puts us through.

Next week we’ll talk about the Spirit, about how the early Church understood Joel, and what that means for us. We’ll continue some of what we just touched on today. I think it’ll be worth our while.

But today: We have to reject the nations' example of rallying ourselves with violence, lying to ourselves about our capacities, and trying to hurt those God is on the side of. We have to remember God will judge evil, and evil does need judged. And we can't forget that God is a God who delights in repentance and loves to forgive.