

Sunday, October 27, 2013: Joel 2:23-32

by [Sara Maitland](#) in the [October 16, 2013](#) issue

When I was a small girl I went to an excellent Sunday school where we were introduced to lots of Bible stories with very few be-good-or-else threats attached. I learned a great many interesting things, including knowing by heart the seven plagues that were inflicted on Pharaoh and his people. This is where I first encountered locusts. As a child they were associated in my mind with the swarms of midges that can spoil many a summer evening on the west coast of Scotland.

Winston Churchill brought the phrase “the years the locust has eaten” into common British idiom in the 1930s by repeatedly referring to the period during which the U.K. failed to rearm, despite Germany’s doing so, as “the locust years.” The expression was taken up in other contexts. In woodland conservation literature, for example, the decades between 1950 and 1980 are called the locust years because of the way tax-incentivized plantations gobbled up vast areas of Scottish landscape, permanently damaging both views and ecology. Nowadays the term has become personal; people speak of difficult periods in their lives as locust years and often draw comfort from Joel’s prophecy.

Only recently have I begun to understand the terrible devastation that locusts inflict on agricultural communities. I used the expression fairly lightheartedly with a Moroccan friend, and she responded with both anger and distress. The 2004 desert locust invasion in Africa did not merely cause significant crop losses; it had an effect on harvests for the following two years, with a serious negative impact on the region’s food security.

She pointed out forcefully that while locusts do not cause famines, their voracity can make a crucial contribution. It’s too easy to forget that in basic agricultural communities, the loss of this year’s crop means seed shortages next year—and it can take several years for olive and date trees to recover. Locust swarms are also, she told me, terribly frightening; they darken the whole sky, and you can see the horror approaching from a distance at high speed. One swarm that year was 150 miles long, more than 90 miles wide and contained an estimated 69 billion locusts, each eating their own weight in grain daily. The UN Food and Agriculture

Organization estimated the cost of fighting the plague at over \$400 million and crop losses at up to \$2.5 billion.

This year it's Madagascar. Over 25 percent of the year's food harvest has already been lost to locusts in a country that is chronically poor and suffering political unrest. The government says it cannot afford to spray from helicopters—an explanation that will do little to comfort the hungry.

This is the situation about which Joel was writing perhaps almost 3,000 years ago, although his dates are uncertain. The main difference is that to the best of our knowledge he and his compatriots would have had no warning at all and no recourse—no sprays, no helicopters, no substantial imports of food from elsewhere, no international charitable interventions.

There is some disagreement as to whether the prophet was describing a literal locust plague or using the image more allegorically, but I do not think it matters. What matters is the extraordinary vividness, passion and beauty of the writing. Joel may be a minor prophet (the term refers to the brevity rather than to the significance of the 12 books that share this designation), but he is a major poet. Anyone who directly inspired both St. Peter at Pentecost and Winston Churchill, one of the great rhetorical speech makers of the last century, has a powerful gift. Joel's descriptions of both the devastation and misery of Judah, and of the comfort and joy that the Lord will bring the people when they repent and come back to him, are rendered in imagery that's unforgettable, rhythmical and beautiful. It is almost a pity that the lectionary selections include only the consolations and not the dark oppressions of the earlier verses, because the contrast is so rich and because the two halves are so subtly and poetically balanced through reiteration, simile and metaphor, thumping drumbeat sentences and other poetic devices.

Some things do not change much. There still are disasters and there still are consolations. There is still a need for social, communal repentance. There is still a need for this sort of hortatory poetry. Tradition has always taught that there are a few things that we can say about an ineffable God: the standard transcendentals, apart from "God IS," are "God is good and truth and beauty." We have lost sight of the beauty of God. As well as reminding us that natural disasters are surprisingly often closely related to human behavior, Joel may also remind us that the beauty of a prophetic (or other) text is a part of what proves its authenticity.