

God's promise to repay (Joel 2:23-32)

It is so tender that God would say God owes us one.

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At bedtime, before we do our breathing exercises and our body scan meditations for anxiety, my son goes over his plans with me for how he will survive a school shooting.

Somehow his fear became worse during the height of the pandemic, when he wasn't going to school. Too much time on his hands to imagine his worst fears, I think.

He has a few plans. He will be proactive, befriend the kids who seem lonely, and defend the kids who get bullied. But if someone starts shooting he will throw a chair, or army crawl to safety, or play dead.

Those are good plans, I reassure him.

I no longer say, "don't worry" or "you'll be safe at school." It doesn't help. What helps is making plans and then taking deep breaths and scanning our bodies from the toes up, releasing the tension wherever we find it. He's usually snoring before we can even scan our knees. Then I say a blessing over him.

I wish I could tell him, "I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten." When I read those words in Joel I feel as if someone has lifted a heavy box from my hands. But I can't make this right. I can't keep my son safe at school. I can't restore the last two years of his life, spent mostly in his bedroom instead of in the

classroom or on the ballfield. There's so much I can't undo.

Joel promises restoration to a devastated, starving Israel. "I will repay you," says the Lord. I have been meditating on those four words. There can be so much value in simply acknowledging that something has been lost, that someone is in pain. It is so tender that God would say God owes us one.

If I can't restore my son's childhood innocence to him, I can at least acknowledge the reality of his fears. Once when I was going through a hard time, someone I love hugged me and whispered in my ear, "you're stronger than you know." I wanted to punch him in the face. Not just because it sounded like something he'd cribbed from a hand-lettered sign at a craft store, but because what I really wanted was for someone to acknowledge how awful it was that I had to be so strong.

An agricultural plague of locusts can devastate a land and its people for generations, and this still happens all over the world, so maybe I am being too flip to apply it as a metaphor. But even Joel may have been using the locusts as a metaphor for any number of threats to Israel. It doesn't take locusts to upend a life. My son lived through a pandemic. Guns in the hands of other children are the cutters and destroyers he fears most. When I read Joel, I hear God's words as a blessing I can give him.