“Has anything like this happened in your days?”

(Joel 1:2)

During the time of the prophet Joel, a great calamity befell the land. It was unlike anything that folks had seen before. Joel realized that the event that they were living through was a great historical occurrence. In fact, it would be told to their children, their grandchildren and generations to follow. The question was asked: “Has anything like this happened in your days?”

 **(Joel 1:2-4)**

Hear this, you elders, And give ear, all you inhabitants of the land!
Has *anything like* this happened in your days, Or even in the days of your fathers?
**3**Tell your children about it, *Let* your children *tell* their children,
And their children another generation.

What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; What the swarming locust left the crawling locust has eaten; And what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten.

Joel described a great plague of locusts that had overtaken the land. I, for one, have little firsthand knowledge of the destructive nature of the locust. However, that does not diminish from the very real threat this insect posed in the past and continues even until this day. (*Search Youtube.com for Pakistan Locust 2020*).

Chewing---Swarming---Crawling---Consuming

Some commentators will attempt to reconcile symbolically the four types of locusts with the four successive kingdoms spoken of in the prophecies of Daniel. In Daniel’s writings, we learn of four world kingdoms that would take their place on the world stage – Babylon, Medes and Persians, Greece and while unnamed, certainly the Roman Empire. Others feel that the plague was simply that – a literal plague sent by God to remind His people who was in charge. I tend to believe this was a literal event that was also used symbolically by Joel.

Let us assume that an actual, literal invasion of locusts had ruined the land. Ruined the economy. Disrupted daily life. Caused widespread panic across the land. Sound familiar?

 **(Joel 1:10-12)**

 The field is wasted, The land mourns;
 For the grain is ruined, The new wine is dried up, The oil fails.

**11**Be ashamed, you farmers, Wail, you vinedressers,
 For the wheat and the barley;
 Because the harvest of the field has perished.
**12**The vine has dried up, And the fig tree has withered;
The pomegranate tree, The palm tree also, And the apple tree—
All the trees of the field are withered; Surely joy has withered away from the sons of men.

Now we like to say, “The shelves are empty at the grocery store. There is nothing to eat!” Now is this really true? Certain items are hard to find, as scared folks tend to hoard during times of uncertainty. But in Joel’s time, there really was NOTHING TO EAT!

 **(Joel 1:16-18)**

 Is not the food cut off before our eyes,
 Joy and gladness from the house of our God?
 **17**The seed shrivels under the clods, Storehouses are in shambles;
 Barns are broken down, For the grain has withered.
 **18**How the animals groan!
 The herds of cattle are restless,
 Because they have no pasture;
 Even the flocks of sheep suffer punishment.

The seeds would not produce crops. The barns and storehouses were destroyed, no doubt by people looking for food. The herds of animals had nowhere to eat, and everything was in a state of distress. Apparently, to add insult to injury, drought and wildfires had ravaged the pastures leaving the people to exist without much hope. And one more thing, Joel said: A nation great and strong was heading their way to attack. It left Joel to ask:

 **(Joel 2:11)**

 “For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; Who can endure it?”

Sounds like the Covid 19 outbreak of 2020, does it not? Actually, it sounds like our current situation is far better than what existed in the days of Joel. At this point of our study, I would like to caution everyone about proclaiming that the outbreak of the virus is a sign from God. I know for a fact that the locust invasion was punishment sent from God. How do I know this? Because of the verification from God’s word!

 **(Joel 1:15)**

 “…It shall come as destruction from the Almighty.”

So what about Covid 19? Is this a plague sent from God to get His people back in line? Is God punishing the inhabitants of the world for their sins? While that may very well be the case, I simply do not have the verification from the Word of God to establish this as facts. Let your opinions be what they are, but I would advise you of the danger of misapplying Scriptures in order to make a point. Rather, let us focus on doing what is right in the sight of God as far as our handling of this epidemic.

So what did the people in Joel’s day do to handle this unprecedented crisis?

 **(Joel 2:12-13)**

 “Now, therefore,” says the Lord, “Turn to Me with all your heart,
 With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”
 **13**So rend your heart, and not your garments;
 Return to the Lord your God, For He *is* gracious and merciful,
 Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm.

What a beautiful, easy to remember one-liner: “So rend your heart, and not your garments”. This was not to be a spectacle or a grandstanding event that crossed the line to hypocrisy (think of the Pharisee praying on the corner so all could see his righteousness). Godly men and women everywhere were called upon to return to God and lean upon His strength during their time of weakness.

 **(Joel 2:15-16)**

 Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast,
 Call a sacred assembly; **16**Gather the people,
 Sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders,
 Gather the children and nursing babes;
 Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber,
 And the bride from her dressing room.

Declare a holy fast. Assemble as the Lord’s people – men, women and children of all ages! And God’s reply to these actions?

 **(Joel 2:18)**

 Then the Lord will be zealous for His land, And pity His people.

It is not my place to cast judgment upon the decisions of any of our brethren in this time. Leaders of congregations across the country are having to make very difficult decisions as far as the worship assembly goes. My personal opinion has gone back and forth over the last few weeks as I have struggled with this basic question: What is the responsibility of the Church in terms of assembly in the face of Covid 19? Most religious groups have taken the exact opposite approach to this pandemic, and have chosen to cancel face-to-face worship altogether. Congregations of the Church of Christ have grappled with this decision as well with some choosing one of the following options:

 1) Assemble and worship as normal

 2) Assemble and worship with some consideration of local and state decrees

 3) Worship in small groups from homes

 4) Suspend all worship until the virus subdues

Here at the 19th Street Church of Christ in San Angelo, Texas we have made the decision to follow the command of God first and foremost, and continue to assemble for worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:1, Hebrews 10:25). It is not within the Scriptural powers of the leadership of the congregation to “suspend” worship on the first day of the week, at least as far as I know. However, we have taken consideration of the situation and have tried and will continue to be good citizens and neighbors as well. Our assembly will not be long, and we will attempt to follow the guidelines from the powers at be so long as they do not interfere with God’s commands (Acts 5:29). That being said, if an individual member feels uncomfortable with assembly that is very understandable, and they will have to make a decision of conscience that is between them and God. I will not stand in judgment. If individual members are high-risk for infection and sickness, they too will have a decision of conscience to make. If individual members want to practice the 6-ft social distancing rule during worship, that is fine; if members feel the need for facemasks and avoid shaking hands or being too close to others , again that is fine. These are all decisions of conscience between the individual Christian and God – not decisions made by the leaders of the congregation or forced decisions by the local, state or federal government.

So what if our worship this morning is interrupted by the local authorities? No one wants that, but if it happens, we will deal with it in an honest, straightforward and godly way. We cannot allow fear to rule our spiritual lives. I am afraid that this unprecedented event has the power to greatly harm the church if handled incorrectly, but the ability to strengthen the church if we do what is correct and Scriptural.

 **(Joel 2:24-26)**

 The threshing floors shall be full of wheat,
 And the vats shall overflow with new wine and oil.

 **25**“So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten,
 The crawling locust, The consuming locust, And the chewing locust,
 My great army which I sent among you.
 **26**You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
 And praise the name of the Lord your God,
 Who has dealt wondrously with you;
 And My people shall never be put to shame.

I encourage every member of the church to stand fast during this time of great trial and lean one upon one another. We have been commanded by God to assemble as the church in one place (1 Corinthians 11:20) upon the first day of the week (Acts 20:7) to worship, and we will continue to do just that. These rights are guaranteed by our Constitution in this country, and even if they were not, God’s command would still exist. This threat will soon be over, but the dire consequences of improper decisions of leadership could remain forever.