
Restoring the Years

Joel 2:25

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 24, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The American South is a very noisy place. Sit out on your front porch on a summer evening and you're overwhelmed by the surround sound of cicadas. Add the sweat of tropical heat, and you have the perpetual anticipation, the constant sense that something powerful is about to happen, that makes this part of the country such an absorbing place.

Another small creature leaves its mark in a different way. That's the locust. When the desert locust is around, there's always the chance something dangerous is going to happen. Locusts like to get together. A desert locust swarm can pack 60 million locusts into less than half a square mile and stretch to 460 square miles in size. When the book of Joel talks about the locust, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, and how they've ripped the heart out the people of Judah, you know it's describing every farmer's worst nightmare. Each locust can eat its weight in plants in 24 hours, so a full-size locust swarm could eat 423 million pounds of plants a day.¹ A whole year of crops, a whole community's livelihood, a whole nation's survival can be devoured in minutes. There's something about a locust attack – in its swarming, in its insatiable appetite, in its savage obliteration of the crops – that evokes a horror movie. There's nothing to be done other than to grab the shoulder of the person next to you, sink your finger nails into their forearm, and scream.

Stay with that locust storm for a moment. I wonder if you know what it means to experience the devastation of the swarming locust. I'm not thinking necessarily of the kind that destroys crops and petrifies farmers. I'm thinking of a young man who told me about a college prank that went badly wrong and left his brother in prison for a terrible, mandatory minimum sentence, stretching out before his family's future like a yawning gap in their collective vision. He said, "My brother didn't mean it, but now... all those years till he comes out of jail. All those wasted years." I'm thinking of a friend who felt her rights had been painfully and criminally infringed and took the case through the courts and faced year after year of uncertainty and expense and antagonism and grief and heartache until she recognized that the case had completely taken over her life. She said, "It feels like so many lost years. All those years." I'm thinking of a man who grew up with a father who was periodically and unpredictably a danger to himself and those around him in such a way that their home would become a place of fear in which no one felt comfortable going to sleep, and all the family developed habits of denial and distrust that infused all their relationships in later life. He said, "I'll never get those years back. My childhood was a gaping hole of lost years."

I wonder if any of these stories feels like your story. What they have in common is that, in each case, the person felt they'd been robbed of a whole section of their life. They felt, looking back, that all those years had disappeared into a hole. It wasn't just that they had no good memories of those times. It was that there was, even now, nothing to be said about those times – those years were so covered in shame and shrouded in regret and ring-fenced with grief and misery that they couldn't even be shared with any but the most trusted confidante. I wonder if your personal history contains a chapter like that. Maybe you're in one right now.

There may well have been a locust swarm in Judah in the fifth-century that destroyed livelihoods and ruined farmers and left the people starving. But for the prophet Joel, the swarm of locusts is a metaphor for the invading armies that had swarmed into the land of Israel in the preceding centuries, laying waste to the cities and plundering the countryside and leaving the children of God in utter despair. And this is where the power of the metaphor really kicks in. God visits every part of the suffering land and reawakens it, starting with the

¹ <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/bugs/locust.html>

soil, and moving on to the animals of the field, and the trees, and finally the rainclouds. Then, when everything is come back to life, God delivers his promise that the people will eat in plenty and be satisfied, that he, the Lord, will dwell in the midst of them, and that they will never again be put to shame.

This is great and welcome news, and the people are bound to hear it metaphorically as well as literally, that's to say as a promise that the long years of subjection to foreign rule are coming to an end and there will be good times for Israel once more. But think back to what this means for you, on a personal level. Your long nightmare is more or less over, and there's hope of good things to come. That's great. But where does that put those lost years? What joy does that bring to the time you still struggle to put into words, the period you can find no sense in, and can infuse no meaning for? What about those moments when an event occurs that evokes a wave of memories from that buried era, and you hope that no one close to you says a tender word or places their hand on yours because you know if they do you'll crumple into undisguisable sobbing?

Here's where God speaks right into the heart of your bewilderment and despair. "*I will restore the years the swarming locust has eaten.*" Listen to that. Not just a promise about the future. Not just a determination that the good times will roll and you can put the past behind you. No. Something more and different. A promise of healing the past. "*I will restore the years the swarming locust has eaten.*" That's something extraordinary. Think of the young man whose brother spent all those years in prison. "*I will restore those years.*" Think of the woman who spent all that time going to and fro between attorneys and judges and never getting any further with her legal case. "*I will restore those years.*" Think of the young man who grew up in a house of unpredictable and violent danger. "*I will restore those years.*" "*I will restore the years the swarming locust has eaten.*"

Think about your own story. Let those words speak to you. Hear God's promise about abundant food, and an end to shame, and dwelling with the Lord in your midst. I understand if you've heard such promises and you've built up resistances to letting them reach the raw parts of you that cry out for understanding and hope and renewal. But now hear a new word. "*I will restore the years.*" Which years? Come on, you don't need to pretend any longer. You know which years. God knows which years. You know which years. Let yourself hear this new promise, beyond anything you'd dared hope. "*I will restore the years the swarming locust has eaten.*" Let these words seep into your soul.

This isn't about blame, it's not about anger, it's not a question of bitterness. There's a time for all those things, and a time when they can be named and spoken about and not hidden from and recognized and healed. But talking about the locust takes away the distraction of culpability. Swarming locusts aren't evil. They're just being locusts. They do terrible damage, but they're part of creation like the rest of us. The point is, finding who's to blame for those lost years isn't the answer. The years are still lost, whoever's to blame. This isn't about vindication. This is about something more wonderful. This is about *restoration*. This is about something that was lost becoming found, something that was a burden and a curse and a plague becoming a gift.

How can that happen? How can the unspeakable and the unmentionable and the constantly threatening source of loss and pain and degradation be restored as something that brings hope? Let's look together very closely at how it can happen. Restore can mean replace. Well, on the surface, it looks like that's what God is offering. He's offering grain and wine and oil to replace the ones taken by the locusts. But replacing is not restoring. When a friend has a precious possession and you break it and you get the money together and you get them a new one and take it round to them, they pretend and you pretend that the replacement is just the same; but it never is. Restore can also mean reimburse. When something's lost you can try to make up for it by compensating for its monetary value; but things that are really valuable are worth a whole lot more than money. More often than not you'd take the money, but you never for a moment think the reimbursement is the same as restoration.

“I will restore the years.” Those years can’t be replaced and you can’t be reimbursed for them. So how can they be restored? Well, they can be reincorporated. That’s to say, they can come to shape your future in unexpected and beautiful ways. Experience is the name we give to our mistakes [Oscar Wilde], and when experience does no more than take you back to the locust years you remember like a bad migraine, there’s not much to be said for it. But when experience is given time, and understanding, and discernment, and gentleness, and when you later find yourself in a situation that calls for all the resources you can draw on, then experience can be distilled into wisdom. We’d all like to imagine we walk forward into our future, but the truth is we walk backwards into our future, composing our reactions and behavior in unforeseen circumstances out of the discarded elements in our own personal histories. If you’re thinking to yourself, “I can’t imagine any circumstances in which those locust years could come to offer any kind of blessing,” the answer may be, “Perhaps not yet. But there could be something ahead of you where you’ll think differently, and where you’ll find yourself drawing on that troubling time in ways you could never have predicted.” And at the very least, those years will inform your compassion, because you’ll come to realize that, if *you* have in your past the years the swarming locust has eaten, maybe this person you’ve just met does *too*, however slick and put-together and smart and assured they seem. In fact you come to *expect* that they have, unless they truly insist that they don’t, and even then you half wonder if really they do protest too much and the truth is they don’t yet trust you enough to tell you.

Listen to those words once more. “I will restore the years the swarming locust has eaten.” Just imagine you no longer had to try so hard to forget the past, artfully changing the subject every time a conversation got close to locust territory, always wondering, in every relationship, what the other person would think if they really knew the truth about you. Just imagine you were promised a future that didn’t just replace what the locust had eaten, didn’t just reimburse you for it, but truly grafted those years back into your destiny, no longer now as burden and curse but instead as wisdom and compassion. Just imagine, in other words, that you were being given the gospel – the gospel that restores our past and opens out our future. That’s what the gospel does. And what’s the word that describes succinctly the heart of this gospel? The word is resurrection.

More than replacement, more than reimbursement, more than reincorporation, more than restoration: the word is *resurrection*. The locusts scorched the earth till there was no life in it. Jesus too was buried in that scorched earth and there was no life in him. But he was brought back into the story, he was restored, so all those years the locust had eaten, the years of his ministry in Nazareth and Galilee, and before them the years of God’s companionship with Israel over many centuries and glories and tragedies, all those locust years are restored to us – and we call them the Bible, our source of wisdom and compassion, our joy and our gift, the gift that comes from the restoration of those years. It’s *resurrection* that finally heals the locust years, resurrection that gives us back our past as a gift, resurrection that begins to create our hopeful future out of the ruins of our wasted histories.

“I will restore the years the swarming locust has eaten.” Think one last time about your wasted years, your locust years. Is it really beyond God to restore even them? Are you happy to let the swarming locust have the last word? The God who transformed the greatest waste of all, the ruthless slaying of his son – can he not restore your years? Can he not resurrect ... even you?