

September 24, 2023 @ Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel
Psalm 145:1-9, Joel 2:23-32

You've probably heard the old saying, "for want of a nail, the kingdom was lost." It's an admonition to pay attention to small things, since they have a tendency to affect bigger and bigger things. If you're not familiar with it, I'll share the whole saying with you, with this preface: "for want of" is an old linguistic construction that means "because [something] was lacking" or "because [something] was missing." This version is one of the variations in Ben Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanack", though versions have been found written in French and German as far back as the 13th Century.

*For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the message was lost.
For want of a message the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.¹*

I very much appreciate the way this saying illustrates the need to care for small things in order to affect bigger things – even though I struggle with this myself. As a person with Attention Deficit Disorder, I can either focus on the very large or the very small, but trying to hold both means losing both. It's a good, humbling reminder, though, that I can't do everything on my own. Fortunately, none of us have to do everything alone – for God is always with us, encouraging us to support each other.

In 2020, a number of small things went wrong to create a great disaster in the world. At the beginning of the year, a BBC/Netflix documentary crew was in Ethiopia to film the beginnings of the year's gregarious locust swarm. A combination of warm and wet weather had let the swarms grow more than usual – and the 2019 civil war in Yemen meant that there were fewer containment efforts

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For_Want_of_a_Nail

for the swarm. When the pandemic hit, the documentary crew left their cameras and drones, and coordinated with local Kenyans to get this footage of the beginnings of the locust swarm, on the march and beginning its flight. ²

[BBC/NETFLIX - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAI6W2TOkh4>]

This super-swarm of billions of locusts is, fortunately, rare. It's the largest recorded in over 70 years, and finally ended due to rainstorms in the Himalayas weighing down the locusts and preventing them from continuing beyond the mountains. But seeing these insects changes how we hear the book of the prophet Joel these thousands of years later. Joel, it seems, is preaching in the aftermath of a locust swarm that has devastated Israel after the return from exile. This terrible event has destroyed entire fields of grain and grapes, meaning that there is not enough food and wine for the people, nor enough even to make sacrifices of food at the temple. The people of the land are justifiably worried – how will they survive? How will they survive as a family? As a nation? Will God forgive them for not being able to make the sacrifices at the temple?

Yet, after reminding the people of the terrible destruction they have faced, Joel brings good news: God promises to restore all that has been lost and more.

“Rejoice, and be glad... for God has given you the early rain in its season and sent down showers for you, both early and late, as previously. The granaries are full of grain, the vats spill over with new wine and oil. I will make up for you the years the swarming locust consumed – the jumper, the finisher, the chewer – my mighty force that I sent against you. You will have all the food you need to be satisfied...”³

God's action, in seeing the destruction and pain of the people, is not to turn God's back on the people – but instead to reach out and give exactly what is needed to restore them. Yes, the loss of crops is terrible – but God sends the early rains to replace them quickly. When God says, “*I repay you for the years the swarming locust consumed,*” this is language that in Hebrew is used to settle debts; it's like a divine

² The documentary team recovered their equipment and filmed the end of the locust flight in India – an incredible feat given all the shakeups in the world that year!

³ Joel 2:23-26, selected, James Crenshaw trans.

insurance payout.

Now, when Joel refers to the pouring out of the spirit, he's making a reference to other parts of the story. In Ezekiel 39, God says, "*I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel.*" And even earlier, in Numbers 11, Moses says, "*Would that all the LORD'S people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!*" Joel leans into these thoughts, noting that all who worship God have direct access to the Spirit.

But, Joel says, times won't always be good. God's vision and dreams of the Spirit show that things are looming on the horizon. Armies. Blood. Fire. But despite this devastation, Joel promises that there is safety, subtly referencing Proverbs 18:10: "*Adonai's name is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and become inaccessible.*"

Joel, then, shows that God's promises of restoration hold in times of bounty and difficulty. In fact, it could be thought of as a positive version of the "For want of a Nail" saying:

*God makes promises of restoration
 God pours out the rains at the right times for the crops to grow
 The crops grow, and provide food to the people
 The people eat their fill and praise God
 God acts on the promise of restoration
 God pours out the Spirit on all humanity
 The people grow in vision and dreams
 The dreams fill the people with hope in the midst of chaos
 The people praise God and survive
 God continues to act on the promise of restoration*

This promise of restoration that Joel makes is, of course, picked up in the book of Acts, when Peter refers to it taking place again in connection with the events of Pentecost. Peter explicitly extends the pouring out of Spirit on all who worship God. You see, we are all connected with God. We strengthen that connection any time we worship, any time we pray, any time we listen for discernment, any time we help, any time we hope. For God wants us to care for each other, and in so doing, praise God through the living of our lives! This is the praise of the psalmist: "*They will*

speak of the power of your awesome deeds; I will declare your great accomplishments... The LORD is merciful and compassionate, very patient, and full of faithful love.”⁴

We know today that locust swarms happen because of rain at the wrong time and place. But rain also is the way that swarms end – when the wings of the locusts are heavy with rain, they cannot continue. Locusts eat the grain of now, but fertilize the ground as they go, providing a boost to the crops when they are replanted and regrow. God pours out the promise of restoration even in the midst of the great swarm – and God pours out the promise of restoration into each and every one of us, causing us to dream dreams of hope, and envision visions of community. Let us always keep our hearts open to God’s guidance – so that we can know when a nail is needed, and see that God has already provided it.

May God pour out the Spirit on you, that you may dream dreams of hopeful possibility. May God restore to you, in great and small, that which you need to survive. And may Christ lead you always, reminding you that you are loved by God and by God’s children, now and always. Amen.

⁴ Psalm 145:6, 8