

Last week when we started the book of Joel, I had talked at length about how God uses disasters to call us back to himself, how he uses the difficult times in our lives as a way of calling us to repentance. And I think on some level we can probably agree with that. That's fairly easy to grasp, this idea that God uses these things as a way of calling us back to himself. But I think the thing that is more difficult for us to see and certainly more difficult for us to understand is what Joel is talking about this evening in chapter 2, that the disasters that God sends into our lives are not just something that he uses, but it's something that God himself has sent. God himself sends the storm. God himself sends the disaster. These things do not happen by accident. God is the Lord of heaven and earth, and all of these things happen because he has chosen them.

I think the reason that that's very difficult for us to see and understand is because we often think of God as kind of just reacting to things, don't we? That he sees the disaster that has come into our life or whatever it might be, and he might make it smaller. He might make it easier for us to bear, but that's where we try to leave it. But as Joel is going to show us in the reading for this evening, God is the one who sent that disaster so that we would turn towards him and live.

Because when Joel is talking here in chapter 2, he is describing the disaster that he was talking about in chapter 1, which of course was all the grasshoppers that had come upon Israel. And they had destroyed everything. The crops were gone, and it seemed like there was no hope for the future. And he describes them in military terms, calling them soldiers who were coming up over the wall, soldiers who are breaking into houses, soldiers who were destroying everything in their path. But you'll notice what it is that Joel says in verse eleven in our reading: "The Lord utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great. He who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the Lord is great and very awesome. Who can endure it?" These grasshoppers, this great army that has come upon Israel is not just a chance, not just happenstance. It is the Lord's army. God is the one who sent them upon his people. God is the one who told them where to go. God is the one who told them what to do. God sent this plague to call his people Israel back to himself.

But that's hard for us to accept, because I think we try to find any other explanation for this, any other way of explaining this rather than seeing it for what it is. With grasshoppers we might say, "Well, the weather conditions were just right. They multiplied more than usual, and that's the reason why there are so many, so no big deal. It's a natural explanation. We can just kind of move on with our lives." But that's not what the Word says. This is God's army, God's disaster that he has sent to call his people back to himself.

And in a way, Christians, I think that this is really just a modern thing, that we in this time and age very often look for any explanation for these things rather than seeing them for what they are. I think Christians in years gone by understood a lot more readily than we do that God speaks through these disasters that he has sent as a way of calling us back to himself. Let me use a few examples, a historical one. In the year 557 in the great city of Constantinople, which is now modern Istanbul in Turkey, there was a gigantic earthquake. And this earthquake shook the whole city, so that all of the buildings in the city fell down or were severely damaged, even some of the great churches in the city. But the people, when they saw this, cried out to God, cried out to him and said, "Lord, forgive us! Forgive us for the things that we have done. Forgive us our sins, and take this disaster away from us, this disaster which we have deserved because of our sins." And even the Emperor in those days, the Emperor who was the most powerful man in the empire, took off his crown, took off his rich clothes, put on sackcloth, and went barefoot through the city, leading a group of pastors in prayer, calling on God to forgive them. Because they recognized that this had come because God was calling them to repentance.

But would we accept that? Would we say the same thing? We might say, "Well, Constantinople sits on top of a fault line, so it's not any surprise that there were earthquakes very frequently in that city. I mean, whenever there's an earthquake in California, we don't hear anybody saying that we should repent. It just sort of happens, right?" But in doing so, Christians, we miss the point. These things happen, however they happen, because God sends them as a way of calling us to repentance.

Let me use another example. In the same city of Constantinople a few years before that earthquake, a giant plague went through the city. It was actually an early form of the bubonic plague, what we call the Black death that would later go during the Middle Ages through Europe. And it killed thousands and thousands of people in the city. And they cried out to God, saying, "God, forgive us! Forgive us our sins and take this plague away from us, so that we might serve you." And when it did go away, they did turn towards the Lord, serving him in the way that he wanted them to serve.

But do we do the same, Christians? In the face of plague, real or imagined, do we cry out to God, "God, forgive us! Have mercy on us. Help us to turn towards you, because we have deserved these things because of our sins"? Or do we just panic and turn towards the medical community, looking for something else, any way to get out of this? And God gives us those things, yes. But do we hear his call in these things that he has sent?

Because, Christians, God sends disaster exactly so that we would turn away from our sins and live. God sends the storm into our lives so that we would repent. Because, Christians, God does not want to crush us. He is not seeking to destroy us. As it says in Joel starting at verse twelve, "Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents over disaster." God seeks to show us mercy. He seeks to bring us to himself. Because if he gave us what we deserved, we wouldn't be here, and we would deserve it because of our sins. But God does show us mercy by giving us the opportunity to turn towards him, by giving us time in these days to come to him, to repent of our sins, and to live. God wants to show us mercy, Christians, because he loves us. And even if he sends the storm into our lives, it is to discipline us and to teach us the way of life.

So turn to him, dear Christians. Turn to him who wants to save you. Hear his voice in the things which he has sent and live. Because God has called to you also in his Son Jesus Christ that you would turn away from the things of this world, turn away from all of the things which you see around you, and cling to Jesus, because he is the only one by which we will be saved. Christians, God sends the storm, yes. But God sends it so that you might live.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.