“Spiritual Dryness”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Joel 2:28-32

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Did you know that grasshoppers possess five eyes, six legs and two antennae? They eat half their body weight in vegetation every day. Their hind legs function much like springs enabling them to jump twenty times their body length.

When grasshoppers get together and swarm in high density, they are called locusts. An infestation of locusts can spell ruin for farmers.

In 1874, an infestation of locusts descended upon the Great Plains. Nearly 13 trillion locusts devoured the landscape from Texas to the Dakotas. It was a plague of Biblical proportion. They ate everything in sight, even the clothes off people’s backs.

Lest you think locust infestation is a thing of the past, locusts invaded Israel and Egypt last year. This year they are eating their way through the countries of Ethiopia and Madagascar.

Today, our focus is the book of Joel, one of the 12 Minor Prophets in the Old Testament. We’re devoting a summer’s worth of sermons to these Minor Prophets. Each Sunday, we’ll introduce a different Minor Prophet to you. We’ll invite you, in the following week, to read each Minor Prophet on your own. This is not merely an academic exercise. God has treasures to teach us from these obscure books. You can do it! The book of Joel is all of three chapters—73 verses—long.

Let me walk through the book of Joel with you. I pray that it will come alive to you as it did for me this past week.

You’re wondering why I began my sermon with grasshoppers. The book of Joel opens with an invasion of locusts. “What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. What the hopping locusts left, the destroying locust has eaten” (1:4). These cutting, swarming, hopping and destroying locusts represent the four life cycles of the locust. Even the drunks in the street will be deprived of their elixir when these invaders devour every last grape on the vine (1:5).
Joel treats this invasion as a wake-up call to God’s people (1:13-20). Don sackcloth and ashes (1:13). Declare a holy fast. Summon the elders and cry to the Lord (1:14).

The second chapter is more of the same. These locusts will advance like a mighty army (2:2). They will stampede like thundering horses (2:4). The noise will be deafening. They will scale the city walls like seasoned soldiers and rush the city (2:5).

Again, Joel calls the people of God to return to the Lord (2:12). “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may relent and leave behind a blessing” (2:13-14).

Finally, it’s God’s time to speak. What gracious words God offers: “I will drive away this army of locusts” (2:20). “I will pour down abundant rain, spring and autumn showers.” (2:23). “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.” (2:25).

We come, at long last, to the passage I read earlier to begin this sermon. “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams and your young men will see visions. Even on my servants both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (2:28-29).

The words “pour out” bracket this passage for the sake of emphasis. God’s Spirit will be poured out upon his people like torrential rain. Three groups of people are singled out to be soaked with this downpour: sons and daughters, old and young, male and female slaves. This coming Spirit will not discriminate on the basis of age, sex or social standing. God’s Spirit will be poured out on everybody.

Dreams and visions accompany this poured-out Spirit. I’ve never paid much attention to my dreams. Most of my dreams are rather bizarre and seemingly illogical. Lately I’ve been listening to the testimony of people coming to our church from other lands, especially countries hostile to Christianity. They testify that Christ is mediated to them through dreams—Christ inviting them to “come and follow me.” This is consistent
with what I hear from our mission partners. Christ is revealed to people in lands hostile to the gospel through dreams and visions, like the Day of Pentecost.

You might think this passage from Joel is rather inconsequential. Yet, when it comes time for the Apostle Peter to deliver his inaugural Pentecost sermon, he quotes directly from this “pour out my Spirit” passage from Joel.

So what does this ancient prophet and sermon have to do with my life? Some of you aren’t feeling the love from God right now. You have little sense that the Spirit is being poured out in your life. You can’t remember a time when you had a dream or vision which had anything to do with God. If you don’t feel this way, you will. You read the Bible but the words lay lifeless on the page. You pray but your words fall flat. The Spirit’s flow in your life has slowed to a trickle.

Some of you are experiencing spiritual dryness. Your questions go unanswered. Tragedies confound you. Let me offer this encouraging word. Seasons of dryness can actually whet our appetites for God. Spiritual dryness can become a catalyst to a deeper life of faith.

I’ve experienced my share of dry periods in my walk with Christ. There have been times when I don’t feel much like preaching. Charles Spurgeon was regarded as the “Prince of Preachers” in 19th century England. One Sunday, he was so despondent that he couldn’t bear the thought of preaching. So, he asked his associate to preach for him. He escaped London and wandered into a country church. Spurgeon slipped into the last pew and tried to be as discreet as possible. The country preacher began his sermon. Spurgeon was stunned; the guy was preaching one of Spurgeon’s sermons. Midway through his sermon, the country preacher recognized Spurgeon sitting in the last pew. He was mortified. Afterward, the preacher was effusive in apologizing to his famous guest but Spurgeon would have none of it. Spurgeon waved him off saying, “Think nothing of it. Your sermon was just was I needed to hear.”

I have six suggestions if you find yourself in something of a spiritual funk. 1. Let’s start at the beginning with the first suggestion: Be honest with God. You can tell God the truth. “Lord, I’m not feeling close to you
today. My soul is parched and I need your help.” Then, be open to the way God will answer your prayer.

2. Pray the Psalms. The Psalmist went through dry spells also. Half of the Psalms are wintry in disposition. They express lament for crisis, struggle with enemies or wonderment over why God doesn’t answer prayer. I’ve compiled a list of Psalms for you to read and pray during the 23 days left in June. You can access these Psalms on our website or pick up a copy at the welcome table in the lobby: Psalm 4, 6, 13, 22, 27, 31, 32, 34, 37, 40, 42, 43, 51, 61-63, 71, 77, 84, 91, 121 and 130.

3. Confide in a friend. The devil wants nothing more than for you to suffer this dry period in silence. He wants you to think there must be something wrong with you for feeling this way. The demonic thrives on secrecy. Identify someone in this church or among your wider circle of friends with whom you can speak about your spiritual dryness. When we share our burdens, we cut them in half.

4. Take an inventory of your soul. Conduct a searching moral inventory of your life. Then do what Joel advises and repent. Repent means to turn and go God’s way. It could be that some unconfessed sin is blocking the Spirit’s flow in your life. As long as we hold onto our sins, they become the barrier between us and God. Confession becomes the bridge by which we break this barrier down.

5. Restore broken relationships. Imagine your life as intersecting crossbeams. The longitudinal beam represents your relationship with other people while the vertical beam represents your relationship with Christ. Address the horizontal relationships in your life, especially those from whom you are estranged. It may seem like a curious way to address spiritual dryness in your life by working on human relationships. Yet, there’s often a cause and effect relationship between our horizontal relationship with other people and our vertical relationship with Christ.

6. Practice generosity. Sometimes the best antidote for spiritual dryness is to shift the focus away from you and onto someone else. When you’re going through hard times, do something for someone else. Call a friend.
Send an appreciative email. Give your money to support the Lord’s work. I referenced Malachi in last Sunday’s sermon. I’m struck by another bold passage in this Minor Prophet, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse. Test me in this,” says the Lord God Almighty, “and see if I don’t open the windows of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you won’t have room enough for it” (Malachi 3:10). This passage seems too good to be true. “Test me in this,” God says. Practice generosity with your time and money.

There you have it: six suggestions to combat spiritual dryness. Identify some on the list to practice this week. Lock them into your memory or write them down. Don’t put it off. Don’t kick the can down the road to another Sunday. Do it today.