**Sunday, January 31st, 2021**

**Joel 2:26-32**

 An eyewitness to a locust swarm described it in great detail:

They invaded without warning, like a dark cloud, growing and moving.

Then you could hear them.

And the sound was terrifying.

It grew louder and louder.

Their number was astounding.

The whole face of the mountain was black with them.

On they came like a living deluge.

We dug trenches. We kindled fires.

We beat and burned to death heaps upon heaps of the devastating insects.

But the effort was utterly useless.

Wave after wave rolled up the mountainside

          and poured over rocks, walls, ditches and hedges.

Those behind covering up and bridging over the masses already killed.

It was perfectly appalling to watch this animated river

          as it flowed up the road and ascended the hill above the houses.

For four days they continued to pass on toward the east.

When the locusts had passed on, the entire landscape

          looked as though it has been swept by a scorching fire.

The prophet Joel described such a plague of locusts in his time:

          What the locust swarm has left

                    the great locusts have eaten;

          What the great locusts have left

                    the young locusts have eaten;

          What the young locusts have left

                    other locusts have eaten.

Millions of locusts would come and eat every green plant and leaf for miles.

Joel went on to describe the aftermath of the locust swarm.

He told of the devastation his people faced:

          The fear of starvation because of the destruction of crops.

          The seed shriveled and failed to grow under the dirt.

          Their storehouses were empty and desolate.

          The granaries were vacant because the grain had failed.

          And how the animals groaned.

          Herds of cattle wandered about because there was no pasture for them.

          Even the flocks of sheep stood dazed by the devastation.

I doubt there are many of us who have experienced such a locust swarm.

Not having witnessed such devastation, it is hard to imagine.

But if we change Joel's description just a little, we can understand very well:

          What the virus has left unharmed,

                    the new variant has destroyed,

          What the new variant has not destroyed,

                    the brand new variant has infected,

          What the brand new variant has not infected,

                    another form of the virus has come along to harm the rest of us.

It is as if a dark cloud has engulfed us.

We are left in fear, and the pain of lost family members and friends and neighbors.

We are separated and isolated from family acquaintances.

We are devastated by the death and destruction

We have lost jobs and security and freedom.

We search for joy and happiness in our lives.

In the past year, we have struggled in many ways like the people of Joel's time.

Joel urged the people to turn back to God.

He told the people to trust God, and He would bring them through this disaster,

 and they would emerge with a new confidence in God.

Joel's words and teachings are as meaningful for us,

          as they were for the people of his time.

When we turn to God in times of pain and suffering,

          He does give us strength, and patience, courage.

He pours out His spirit upon us and we are given the power to continue.

We discover we are not alone,

God is with us and we have each other.

When everything is falling apart, we learn to trust God,

          and we are able to really help our neighbor.

We discover hope, and we learn to dream again.

Joel message is as important for us, as it was for his people long ago:

          Return to the Lord your God,

          for he is gracious and full of compassion,

          slow to anger and abounding in love.

          Where is God in all this?

Look around and you will discover He is with you.

He has worked wonders before, and He will continue.

He has given us dreams and visions,

          and He will show us the wonders in the heavens and on the earth.

He calls us to live His way, helping one another,

          and trusting He will bring us through the hard times in our life.

God urges us not to be afraid, but to be glad and rejoice.

Often that is not easy.

But with God's help, we can keep on going.

Together, with God's help, we can move the mountains of fear and despair.

The first step is trusting Him.

The second, is following Him.

AMEN