

"Locusts and Lilies"

26 November 2009: Thanksgiving Service with Temple Sinai

[*The lessons for this service were Joel 2:21-27 and Matthew 6:25-33.*]

I take as my text today, the words of the prophet Joel:

"I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten..."

It may strike you as a strange or discomfoting text for Thanksgiving, raising odd or unfamiliar or frightening images in your minds. If it is any consolation, I will get to the lilies of the field, but I am not going to start there. Rather, I would like to begin by inviting you to let your imaginations loose and to consider what it might mean to live in a world where swarming locusts can strip the land bare and leave famine and desolation behind.

As a little girl, I read the Laura Ingalls Wilder books over and over. Those of you who are female and close to my age probably read them yourselves; if you are male, but have daughters or grand-daughters, you will likely know the books I am talking about.

In her book, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, there is a description of a phenomenon I had only read about before in scripture, a phenomenon that I have never seen and never hope to see: a description of a plague of locusts. Laura tells how the locusts flew into the area one day in clouds so huge that they covered the sun and made it deep twilight. Then they settled onto the prairie and began to march. As far as the eye could see, the prairie was a seething mass of moving brown as the locusts marched, eating everything in their path. Laura and her sisters could not go outside because they had no shoes and there was no place to step that was not covered with locusts. This continued for days as millions upon millions of locusts marched, voraciously eating. When they had passed, there was nothing left: the trees were stripped, the garden was empty, the wheat and rye and grass were gone.

God promises, "I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten..."

Compared the Ingalls family, the vast majority of us here in Colorado live in a remarkably predictable world. Except for the farmers and the homeless among us, even the vagaries of the weather are more an *irritation* than a *danger*. There may be no rain or too much rain. It may be unseasonably cold or hot. Many of us will notice and grumble, but few of us will fear that our livelihood will vanish, that we may go hungry, lose our house.

Compared to the Ingalls family, we live in a remarkably predictable world. Do we? Really? There are certainly parts of the world that are relatively predictable. We expect that when we flip a switch, there will be light. We expect that when we pick up a phone, there will be a dial tone. Unlike the Ingalls, we can safely expect most of the "services" we need to be available to us when we need them. But which of us has not experienced sudden ill-health ourselves...or on the part of a family member? Which of us has *never* suffered from an accident or had a family member or close friend suffer from an accident? Which of us has not ourselves lost or known a neighbor to have lost a house to fire? a spouse or child or sibling or friend to

death? a job to downsizing? a marriage to divorce?

We are, perhaps, not as far removed as we might imagine from the Pilgrims who clung to survival through the first winter in Plymouth by their fingernails and with the gracious help of the local native peoples; or the Ingalls family who survived the plague of locusts only because Pa went back east more than once (walking hundreds of miles each time) leaving Ma and the children alone for six months at a time, in order to earn hard cash working in a lumber camp or on the railway lines. I would like to invite you to consider that we have all had "years that were eaten by the locusts." You may be living in one now.

Yet, in the passage from Joel, the prophet tells us more than once, "Do not fear..." In the passage from the gospels, Jesus tells the people three times, "Do not worry..." Joel speaks the prophetic word of hope, Jesus speaks the gentle word of comfort, not because there is nothing to fear--but because there *IS*.

We are gathered here today to worship together in thanksgiving. We are gathered to give thanks not because nothing bad has happened or is happening, but in spite of the bad. We gather in the face of the locusts. We gather tonight not in our worldly wealth, but in our spiritual need. We gather to learn from one another how to give thanks "everywhere and always." We gather because most of us are still amateurs at naming the blessings and gifts that surround us not only in days of plenty, but in days of barrenness and sorrow and pain. We gather to remind one another of God's continual outpouring on our behalf and to hold each other accountable to give thanks to the God who over and over has fulfilled God's promise to pour abundance into our lives.

The Pilgrims gave thanks as the cold of their second winter set in. Almost half of them had died the first winter; there were no guarantees that *any* of them would survive the months of cold and disease that faced them, but they stopped and rejoiced not only for having lived through the first year, but in preparation for what was yet before them. Abraham Lincoln asked the American people to stop and offer thanksgiving in the late fall of 1863. The War Between the States was still going on, but Lincoln had hopes that the devastation would soon be over and he asked others to stop and open their hearts in gratitude even in the face of the death that might lie ahead.

To be a person of faith means giving thanks not only when things are going well (although few of us do even that much consistently--), but as an act of faith when we cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. To be a person of faith means being called to the great delight and the foolish enterprise of hearing the words of the prophets, facing straight into the locusts, and giving *thanks!* Wars and pestilence, holocausts and earthquakes, inhumanity to one another, famine, flood, drought, and violence, all have swept through our communities over the span of our existence as human creatures of this earth. But we are still here.

I am not suggesting that it is *easy* to give thanks "always and everywhere;" that is why we come together to do it. *Together* we have strength and confidence and hope and support that we do not have in our isolated rooms. We do it *in community* because sometimes giving thanks is too hard for us to do alone, and we need to lean on one another for emotional and spiritual

strength as the locusts march through our broken world.

Twenty-three years ago--a month before Thanksgiving--my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. On Thanksgiving Day, she was out of the hospital and we were able to be *together* as a family, leaning on each other. The locusts were swarming, but together we faced them and found ourselves grateful almost beyond words for whatever time was left...and, indeed, there were two more Thanksgivings we celebrated with her.

Eight years ago (one week after Thanksgiving), I received a phone call in New York City that my husband, commuting home from work on his bicycle, had been hit by a truck and was being airlifted to the trauma center in Springfield. All the nurse was prepared to tell me was he had severe chest injuries and I should get to the hospital with all possible speed. Across the country -- across the world, as it turned out -- a vast network of prayer began. My father began the two hour drive to reach my daughter at her school and take her to her father's bedside, not knowing whether George would still be alive. My brother-in-law dropped his work, drove an hour into Manhattan to get me, and then drove me three hours north to Springfield, keeping me sane all the way.

Over and over, I have been blessed to learn what the Pilgrims learned: that the time to give thanks is NOW because that is all the time we have. Whatever locusts are swarming in our lives, we give thanks because God has promised us again and again that the locusts are not the last word. And again and again, that promise has been fulfilled.

In summer, we give thanks for the lily blooming in the fields that day. We give thanks not because the lily is immortal. It isn't. We give thanks because it is here *now* to grace our lives with beauty and color and scent, and *now* is the only time there is. And even if tomorrow, the lily is eaten by the locusts, we have had it, we have noticed it, we have dared to name it one of God's blessings. Nothing can take away the fact that it bloomed in beauty and God has promised that it will bloom again...whether we are here to see it or not.

But we have seen it *this* moment. We have opened our hearts to be fed by it in *this* moment. Giving thanks is engaging in the risky business of affirming life when everything else around us seems to be affirming death. Giving thanks is saying that the headlines touting disaster in Iraq or Afghanistan, in the Mideast or Africa or our own inner cities are not the last word. Giving thanks is saying that our pain, our grief, our hunger, our fear, are not what define us...however powerful and seemingly all-consuming they may be at this moment. Giving thanks is committing to living this moment, this *now*, fully.

Every day (*every* day) is a day of Thanksgiving when we listen to the words of comfort and confidence God speaks to us and to all people across the ages...in years of plenty and in years that "the swarming locust has eaten." Every day (*every* one) is a day of Thanksgiving when we hear God's promise of abundance in the face of danger, pain, sorrow, violence, war and pestilence. Every day, every single *now*, is a day of Thanksgiving when we respond to God's invitation and lift our hearts in remembrance for every blessing that has ever been and in faithful hope and anticipation of the blessings yet to be with the coming of God's commonwealth of justice and equity. Every day is a day of Thanksgiving. It is so. May it be so. Amen.

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