

The Year the Locusts Ate

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Joel 2:25

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“It was about the beginning of September 1664 that I, among the rest of my neighbors, heard in ordinary discourse that the Plague was returned again.” So begins Daniel Defoe’s “Memoirs of the Plague Year,” a work of fiction based in fact, making Defoe a sort of eighteenth-century Tom Wolfe. It’s a harrowing tale.

The Black Death, which we know now as the bubonic plague, first appeared in England in 1349. Spreading across Europe, it is thought to have killed one third of the people living there. It returned again and again between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries, after which it virtually disappeared, although we still have occasional reports of it, especially among prairie dogs, in the Four Corners area of our own country.

Where it came from and where it went, wrote Defoe, weren’t really concerns of those threatened by it in London; what mattered to them was that it was back and there was little anyone could do to defend themselves against it.

The city of London, where Daniel Defoe’s fictitious narrator H.F. lived, was gripped by fear and helplessness, compounded by ineffectual attempts to guard against the disease and conflicting information as to how best to avoid sickness. Many families, including the royal family of the recently restored British monarchy, fled London. The poor, as always, were hit hardest. They couldn’t afford to leave. Whole families were shut-up in their homes, a red cross painted on their doors along with the words, “*Lord have mercy upon us.*”

Over the course of about a year, between 1665 and 1666, approximately 100,000 citizens of London died. That’s just London. One city. Many survivors lost their whole families. Many were reduced to poverty. The city was scarred for generations by the pandemic.

Most of us have learned what we know about pandemics by reading literature like Defoe’s novel or histories of ancient events. Some have heard stories from our parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents who survived the influenza pandemic of 1918, or have read our neighbor John Barry’s book about that pandemic. That’s how we learned about pandemics.

Until this year. This year we learned about pandemics firsthand. We’re still learning.

We are learning about the strange ways contagions move, like a tide ebbing and flowing, eddying and rushing. We are learning about the helplessness one feels when the enemy is invisible and ubiquitous. We are learning how disease is aided and abetted by those in power who bend and distort information to fit their agendas. We are learning about the dangers a population can pose to itself by irrationality, anxiety and scapegoating.

We have learned a lot this year, and we're still learning. And almost everything we have learned so far has been new to us. But to *humanity*, it has been just the most recent round in an old, old story.

Not even the flea that threatened Justin's Byzantine Empire almost two thousand years ago was new. Plague predates even the Bible. But it is in the Bible we find the most potent metaphor for understanding these times when nature in one form or another rises up unbound, and overpowers our best efforts to tame it.

This was the "*the year the locusts ate.*" Throughout this year, I've reflected biblically and theologically, and I am struck by lessons our faith teaches in such extreme times. There are at least three lessons.

First: To ask whether God *uses* catastrophes to teach us is altogether different from asking if God *causes* catastrophes to teach us.

Joel's theology reflects a common (and I believe a mistaken) religious notion, that God visits terrible events upon us to teach us a lesson. Joel, like Cotton Mather and his Puritans, and like some well-known television evangelists, preached that the calamities of history are caused by God to punish and correct us.

This perspective was so common that in the time of Jesus, he found it necessary to rebut it, to contradict it specifically, to a group of religious leaders who have gathered to debate with him. A man is sick: is he sick because he sinned or because his parents sinned? A group of people die in a horrendous accident: did God cause their death because they were evil, or in order to teach other people? Jesus rejects all of these speculations. Bad things happen to good people. That's just a fact. That's just unvarnished reality.

The nourishing rain, Jesus tells us, falls on the crops of the just and the evil. Stop looking to blame. God doesn't work like that. Rather, Jesus suggests, ask what we might learn in the midst of such catastrophes. Don't waste a disaster, he seems to say. Look to your heart. Ask God how God can *use* this moment to make us more mature, wiser, more compassionate to ourselves and to others.

God leads us, God teaches us, through whatever befalls us. Into every life enough rain will come to teach us when we ought to carry an umbrella, and when we should accept getting wet. But the rain is just going to fall.

Second: Our faith differentiates between "*wasted time*" and "*lost time.*"

Psalms 56 has become one of my favorite psalms. It expresses the anxiety of a person who lives surrounded by danger. The psalmist prays: "though I am sometime afraid, yet I place my trust in thee." The most wonderful passage in this psalm says: "Thou tellest my flittings; put my tears into thy bottle; are not all these things noted in thy book?"

The lives we entrust to God, even in times of greatest loss, are never wasted. God collects and saves even our tears in his bottle. God has written our losses in his own book, where they are remembered by him. The very Being of beings himself carves into the tissue of his own heart our worries and our struggles. Not a jot is lost, but is recovered and held by the faithfulness and love of God.

Even the prophet Joel, who did indeed believe that God caused the locusts to come to punish his people, even Joel rushes to affirm that God can redeem his people's losses, pay them back exponentially, compensate them for what they have lost. Personally, I find all of these translations of Joel wanting. However, it is clear that when we read Joel's prophecy in light of the life and teachings of Jesus, neither plague, nor devastations, neither heights, nor depths, neither powers, nor principalities, nor even death itself can separate us from the love of God. Nothing that God has created is ever wasted; God holds all things even as they move from one form to another.

Finally: Our faith shows us how to live through events over which we have no control.

The feeling of helplessness in the face of the pandemic, a feeling many people report, isn't an illusion. There really is a kind of capriciousness in the movements of this plague.

It reminds me of the tornado that struck our community near Austin over twenty years ago. I watched from our front lawn as the tornado, which had been eastbound, turned on a dime and headed straight south toward our house. Debris could be seen flying in the air; the funnel snaked through the clouds sucking up the property and lives it blew apart. As it headed toward us, and as I ran into the house to herd our kids and dogs into the downstairs bathroom, the tornado skipped right over a whole row of houses in its path, then slammed down again tearing a hole in our house. Immediately across the street the house escaped any damage, while the house next to it appeared fine, until the inspectors discovered later that it had been lifted from its foundations, turned six feet, and set back down. It had to be demolished and rebuilt.

There seemed to be no rhyme or reason. It smelled like evil to me to walk through our home strewn with glass and water and tree branches, but it was just nature.

It's much the same with this pandemic. One family takes every safety measure recommended, and loses a grandfather, a mother, and a child. Another family disregards all safety measures, and no one falls ill. There are times — even on good days — when it feels like we're on a roller coaster equipped with a fake steering wheel. Taking sensible precautions is sensible. But taking precautions isn't the same as having control.

Those ancient Stoic thinkers, like the Roman Seneca and the Greek Epictetus, lived through periods of history as subject to natural disasters as ours, indeed disasters and threats of every sort imaginable; their thought influenced early Christians so much that the early church baptized their teachings and borrowed them.

How are we to live among the un-ignorable realities of threat and devastation we have witnessed this year?

"If any external thing causes you distress," writes Marcus Aurelius in his diary, "it is not the thing itself that troubles you, but your own judgment about it. And this you have the power to change."

"For what is weeping and wailing," asks Epictetus, "but the expression of a judgment? What is misfortune? A judgment we make in our own minds.... We are disturbed not by the external things that happen but by the judgments we make about those things. For example, death is nothing terrible; for if it was, it would have seemed terrible to Socrates."

These teachings run so close to Jesus' own that I find myself convinced that wherever wisdom is found it comes from God. Jesus walks through the greatest dangers saying to us, "Be not anxious. Neither be afraid." "Let not your hearts be troubled. You trust God. Trust me too."

This year's experience has led me to perhaps an unexpected conclusion: the pandemic really doesn't *change* the nature of life; it concentrates it.

Life is never really under our control; it is unpredictable. And the basic nature of nature is change. Always has been. But in this crisis through which we have been living, the unpredictability of life is concentrated. We can't ignore its unpredictability.

Life is impermanent. We all know that. Nothing lasts forever. But during this pandemic we've gotten a fresh dose of just how fragile our lives are. Vigorous, healthy athletes have succumbed to this disease, as well as people with underlying health problems.

Half a million deaths remind us (even if we didn't need reminding) that we are here for a very brief span of life, and it should not be taken for granted. We might not have been fully conscious of this fact on ordinary days before the pandemic. But in the midst of this pandemic, we can't miss it. And just as the pandemic has concentrated the fundamentals of life - its unpredictability and impermanence - it has also concentrated the opportunity to learn and gain wisdom.

Ultimately we control nothing external to ourselves. What we have some control over is how we live under threat, how we respond to what happens to us and around us. Will we allow God in this moment to make us more compassionate, or will we become less so? Will we allow God in this moment to create within us a greater capacity to love, or will we close ourselves to others and their needs? Will we allow God to use the dangers we face to teach us to entrust ourselves to the one who walks with us through every valley of the shadow of death, or will we allow ourselves to fall victim to anxiety?

The concentrated reality of the pandemic asks, *if we have only this brief and fragile moment on earth, how shall we live it?*

Amen.