

2016 NL3 WK13 Joel 2:12-13, 28-29
16-12-05 2nd Sunday of Advent

God's beloved people, grace and peace to you in the name of our crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ....Amen.....

I'm so glad you're all here!.... This has been a busy week, and as our plans for celebrating Advent move toward Christmas in the church, in our homes, and in the world all come together in these weeks of Advent, we need this time on Sunday morning to regroup and settle in.

This is a place that God calls to us to return to, over and over again. At least once a week God promises to meet you here, on Sunday, to worship with the gathered community of faith in this place – a people gathered and sent in the love of Christ. So we come as God gathers us, and we nestle into those gracious and merciful arms.

Maybe this time of year, more than any other, we need that gracious invitation and welcome to return because December on the calendar and Advent on the church calendar can be so hectic. Just this last week or so we had Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, Cyber-Monday, and Give Back Tuesday – people..., groups..., organizations..., stores..., and more all throw one hand in our pockets and with the other have a hold of our heart strings.

This time of year our hearts go through all manner of feelings and emotions. Some of it is Hallmark movie material when people return home for the holidays and relationships are restored. We have anticipation..., we have sorrow..., we have joy.... We miss people who aren't in their usual spots..., we mourn the loss of traditions..., we get excited to begin new traditions.... We look forward to worshiping our Lord, celebrating again God's coming to earth and ultimate landing in our hearts. All of that is on our hearts and minds.

And so we are gathered here.... at the invitation of our Lord.... With open hearts.... I like to think of these Sundays of Advent as "Re-group Sundays." As rest-areas along the highway of December..., as springs in the desert..., as a homecoming where the God of Joel stands waiting... *gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

Our story today is about a tired and worn out people. Their homes lay in ruins..., their land was desolate because a plague of locusts had come charging through like a mighty army bent on punishing everything in their path. Joel preached this plague as God's judgement and called for the whole nation to return to the Lord with their whole hearts.

"*Yet even now...*" says the Lord..... Sometimes I hear these words as pointing to complete resignation. Have you ever thought "now what?" Have you ever gotten to a point where you just don't know what's next? Those kinds of times could be a sign that we have done all that we could do on our own. All of my own inner resources are used up. My own ideas are done. The world around me is coming apart.

If we were making a movie, this would be the lowest part. The point where the hero either makes a hero-move, or the story ends in tragedy.....

But THIS place has more to offer in addition to being a place of physical rest..... Don't get me wrong... sometimes rest is the greatest gift that we can receive, but even more importantly, God also meets you in this place to give you rest for your souls.... No matter what.... God says, "*Yet, even now....*" NOW you're ready for my grace.... Even after all that.....

God meets you here, *gracious and merciful*, to hear your confession of sin..., to fully embrace you in your return..., so that you may know that you live a forgiven life.

God meets you here today in his Word and in the sacrament of Holy Communion – communion, it's in the word: to gather you and all of us together as one... for you to receive a personal gift of forgiveness even as God gathers us as a communion community.

God meets you here to lift your burdens, so that you don't have to carry that sin around anymore. Is there something that you need to confess? Joel spoke to a whole nation, and today he speaks to you.... Is there something that's holding you down.....? Give it to God. *Return to the Lord with your whole heart*, and know that you are set free.

Joel's assurance to you is that in returning, you will not be turned away. God invites you to pour your whole heart into your prayers to God. And God will not bring shame upon you.....

The invitation to return is Always out there for you. So every time you pray to God is a returning.... Every time you consciously seek God it is a returning.... To return does not imply a walk of shame, but a glorious homecoming.... A return to the one who sets us all free.

"Afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh – your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. EVEN on the male and female slaves... I will pour out my spirit."Says the Lord.

Boys and girls..., young and old..., slave and free – one commentator points out the democratic nature of God's spirit – it's spread out there generously, abundantly, and everywhere for everyone. Even you.

In our relationship with God, when we have used up all of our own ability to get through life, the hero-move is one of repentance. Of returning to the Lord your God. The world and sin would tempt us to just try harder. God says, return to me..., repent..., start fresh..., as I pour out my spirit on you. So that he can send you back into the world with his love to share.

Thomas Keating, a Roman Catholic spiritual director and Cistercian Monk says, that "once we grasp the fact that the Word of God is living within us, we realize that we are not alone. We are lived in by God." (*The Mystery of Christ*, p.23)

And so the returning becomes a glorious homecoming... practicing in this day for that time called "the Day of the Lord...." when God gathers all of us to our eternal home. Amen.....