

Even Now: A Communion Meditation for Advent 2 (Peace)
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Joel 2:12-13, 28-29; Luke 1:26-38

The first chapter of the book of Joel describes a nation losing hope. There's a plague of locusts, which could be about ecological destruction or a metaphor for an invading army, which brings its own kind of environmental damage.

Either way, the land has been ravaged and there's nothing left to offer, and the people don't see how they can play a role in the unfolding of God's future. The world was turned upside down, everything was uncertain.

And that is when Joel says: Yet, even now.

Even now, when you're anxious and worried.

Even now, when it feels like you have nothing left to offer.

Even now, as you try to figure out how to manage when everything is upside down.

Even now, with all these rules and restrictions and circumstances.

Even now, when it feels impossible.

Yet even now, says the Lord...return to me with all your heart.

Your heart that has been broken again and again, as we experience loss upon loss: of life, of livelihood, of relationships, of security, of celebrations...

And just when it feels like our hearts can't take anymore, God invites us to be broken open one more time.

"How can this be?" How can this be? Those are the first words Mary says to the Angel. She sounds so innocent, so pious, so.. Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz.

It's a fair-enough question. After all, the basics of biology haven't changed that much these past 2,000 years. Bearing a child while being yet a virgin would have been as surprising then as it would be now.

But Mary's is not the first surprising pregnancy in the Bible. Abraham and his wife Sarah, they had angelic visitors tell them she'd be pregnant, too. "How can this be?" we can imagine her asking. Her difficulty was that she was in her 90's, not that she was a virgin.

A woman named Hannah prayed and prayed for a child, even to the point of offering her first born to the temple, if only she could have that child in the

first place. When the good news finally came, “how can this be?” must have gone through her mind. Hannah’s difficulty was that she had been unable to conceive—or so, she and everyone else thought, not that she was a virgin.

Even right here in the gospel of Luke, the story opens with Mary’s cousin Elizabeth and her unexpected pregnancy that leads to the birth of John the Baptist. “How can this be?” is not too far from what her husband Zechariah asked.

It’s a question we’ve asked before... how can this be? Whether we are receiving news about a sudden tragedy, or news of great joy and healing and progress, we’ve all, at some point in our lives, raised the question, “How can this be?”

Whatever Mary imagined herself be capable of, the Word from God came to interrupt and surprise and upend her plans. Some readers of this story object to the fact that it seems like Mary has no agency, that she has no choice about the matter at hand...

But, at least some sense, that may have been the point.

We don’t get to choose whether God will bless us,
and we don’t get to choose the true self God calls us to be.

We are called and commissioned: to hear, believe, and respond to God’s blessing wherever we are.

In that open space, God will leave a blessing, even if we aren’t sure what that means... Yet, even now.

And isn’t that just what Advent is supposed to be about? An opening, a making space, a preparation for God to come into the world and do a new thing. An impossible new thing, the divine becoming human, taking on flesh and living among us... yet, even now. How can this be?

The prophet Joel called the people to come and worship, in the midst of all the devastations of the year. There was nothing left to offer, the land was ruined, the crops and animals gone, they were empty-handed. They could not worship the way they were used to... but still, all of them, even the ones usually left out, were called to bring what they had: their hearts, their minds, their strength, all broken open.

God would take care of the rest, though maybe not quite in the way they expected.

This year, when so much we are used to feels darn near impossible, God is still calling us to break open and make space... to turn to God with all our heart, and find that there is a blessing we never expected, poured out.

Into all those open hearts, God pours out the Spirit — not just on church people, not just on leaders, not just men, not just adults, not just on those who were ready or worthy... but on us all.

God coming to earth wasn't just for some, but for all. We might hear the word from strangers or outsiders, we might hear it coming from our own mouths, we might hear God speaking through the people on the lowest rung of society, in a different accent or with a completely different way of communicating.

Joel calls us to be ready, to open our hearts to receive the truth that God is in our midst — even if God comes to us...

as a peasant baby,
born to an unwed teenage mother,
in a borrowed stable,
in an occupied foreign territory.

This Advent season, can we stand to break open our hearts one more time? To listen for the voice of the Spirit coming from unexpected places, in the midst of a devastated land?

Perhaps we might listen for the Spirit speaking through those who are imagining a way of worship that meets the challenges of a new day and a new generation — in Joel's time they were forced to change because they physically could not do what they use to do. How familiar that feels today!

Will the visions and prophecies poured out on young and old show us a path toward encountering God anew?

Yet even now, says the Lord: return to me with all your heart.
Yet even now, says the Lord: you shall know that I am in your midst.
Yet even now, says the Lord: I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.

This may be an Advent and Christmas like no other...but in the most important way, it's the same as ever: in the disruption, in the darkness, in the wondering and the waiting, Emmanuel, God is with us.

May it be so. Amen.