

Advent 2 Sermon: Joel 2:12-13, 28-31

For the last several years during Advent, I've focused on Christian spirituality, particularly as expressed through some spirituality practices. This year will be no exception. Conveniently, the readings for the next three weeks focus on God's Spirit...the Holy Spirit.

At their heart, Christian spirituality practices are practices which take us out of our own heads and create a space for us to become more aware of the presence of God's Spirit, poured into us.

Spirituality practices, or contemplative practices, can best be described as practices that either allow you to listen for the voice of the Spirit, or in some cases that just allow you to rest, wordlessly, in the presence of God.

Contemplative practice can look strikingly like doing nothing. I think in part for that reason, there's often a lot of resistance among people to contemplative practices. Even some of my colleagues in ministry call it navel gazing.

We live in a culture that mightily resists anything that even hints at wasting time. If we're not producing something at any given moment, we are just taking up space. Perhaps that's the most important gift of spirituality practice...it is resistance to the notion that our worth is based on what we can produce or what we do.

I have been doing some sort of spirituality practices for probably the last 25 years. Learning to listen for the voice of the Spirit is probably why I'm here doing this. I doubt I'd still be a doctor – I don't feel I was going to last in that regardless...but I'm not sure I'd be a pastor.

Those practices have gotten me through other hard stuff as well. And sometimes those practices have painfully shown me things about myself I'd rather ignore...but things that ultimately lead to healing.

Boiled down to its essence, prayer and contemplation are a return to God...spiritual practice is to take time to step away from what's going on in the world and to be drawn closer to God.

It is especially important when the world seems to be falling apart.

And the prophet Joel's world was falling apart. We don't know much about Joel. Unlike most of the other prophets, there is nothing in the book that helps us date it or place it in any kind of historical context.

What we do know is that there's a terrible crisis. The nation has been invaded by vast swarms of locusts...those big grasshoppers. It's like what happened to parts of the Great Plains in America during the 1930's.

Most of us didn't live through that, but for us who grew up in Nebraska or one of the other Plains states, we probably remember learning about it in history. In a time when drought was already an issue, millions of grasshoppers invaded.

They could eat an entire field of crops in a few hours. They even ate inanimate objects like wooden fence posts and farm implements. On top of the drought, depression, and dust bowl, the locusts compounded the misery exponentially.

That seems to be the issue in Joel's world. In the absence of any kind of safety net, that kind of destruction would mean scores of human deaths as well. It really was a colossal disaster.

Joel's interpretation was that this was the end of it all. This was God's final judgement on the people.

Well, it didn't turn out to be any more than the thousands of disasters since then. We will always be on thin ice when we attribute any disaster to God's judgment.

Even so, the proper response to disaster is still to return to God. To turn away from that which is not of God and return to God.

To pray...to fast...to turn to God with humility, to return to God with our whole self, mind body and spirit. That's what Joel is telling the people to do here.

In the midst of our own crises, we can hear those words for us, too. Crisis can in fact be the most important tool God has for drawing us back. As I've said before I don't believe God caused the pandemic...or any other disaster...to punish us. Disasters, personal and societal, are part of life. And some of them we ourselves have caused, or at least contributed to.

But God will use those crises to draw us back to Godself and to the way of life God wills for us.

So how can we use Joel's words here as we think about our own practices? First, Joel tells the people to fast. Fasting is a spiritual practice. It's not typically one our own tradition does much with unless you count the occasional giving up something for Lent. But it remains an important part of some Christian traditions

The next part I think gets a little more traction for us...weeping, mourning, and tearing not our clothes which for ancient Israel was a sign of repentance, but rather tearing our hearts...rending our hearts. Well, what the heck does that mean?

That broken heart is what we're driven to when all our own schemes and designs have failed and we have nothing left. In Psalm 51, after David has been caught in his evil scheme with Bathsheba, David writes this: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Rending our hearts means coming before God, knowing that so much of what we were so sure of doesn't seem to be true after all...and that we don't have all the answers.

It's about humility. We don't much like the sounds of that. In our can do society, we reject the notion that we can't solve any problem on our own. Even our prayers can lead us to hear a voice that in fact isn't God...a voice that only confirms what we already believe to be true.

Real prayer and contemplation isn't like that. Real spirituality will make you less convinced that you've got it all figured out.

Real spirituality will help you see things about yourself that you don't want to...it will make us see things about our society that we don't want to.

So what is real spirituality? When we think of prayers, we think about asking God for things...healing, peace, justice, and so on. We pray for ourselves and for others. Those are important prayers.

But contemplative spirituality is those wordless prayers...meditative practices. Things like meditating on a passage of scripture...or what we're going to do during worship through the rest of Advent, meditate on an image.

Contemplative spirituality can be Centering Prayer...a type of prayer in which we sit in silence and as our mind wanders, we release those thoughts and return to a place of quiet through a sacred word.

It can be a meditative walk...or certain types of journaling. I haven't put out the December newsletter yet – I wanted to wait until after our conversation about Christmas Eve. But in that, I'll list some practices and how to do them.

The Advent materials I sent out have some basic forms of some of the spirituality practices.

So what's supposed to be the outcome of all this? The result?

It takes a while – you can practice for a long time and not be sure much has changed. I think that's part of the resistance. It can feel like doing nothing and doesn't seem to yield obvious results...at least not the quick ones we want.

But over time, contemplative practice gives us a better sense of our connection to God.

It also gives us a better sense of how we are connected to one another...and to all of creation. It helps us weed out the stuff that is likely not of God. And it helps us to see what our own gifts are and what is ours to do in the work of God's mission.

As we continue to be faithful to some sort of spirituality practice, our actions begin to reflect that God we meet within.

As Joel goes on, he does what all the prophets do...he moves from God's judgment to God's mercy...to hope for healing and restoration.

He moves from the immediate concern of the locust invasion to the coming Day of the Lord...a day of judgment to be sure...but also a day when God's spirit will be poured out on all people.

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his spirit in its fullness is an endtimes prophecy – we aren't there yet.

But after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, God's spirit was poured out on the apostles. And from there that spirit spread and grew the fledgling church.

That same spirit was poured into us at our baptism. When we practice spirituality, we are connecting with that spirit that dwells deep within us, below the layers of arrogance, shame, fear, or resentment.

And there, we meet the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

