

“Embodying Peace”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Second Sunday of Advent  
Edina Morningside Community Church; December 4, 2016

[Joel 2:12-13, 28-29](#)

*Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.*

*...Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.*

A great debate rages this time of year in seminary classrooms, cathedral hallways, and anywhere that liturgical snobs like to gather. Granted, it’s not a battle as epic as that between the Union and Confederate sides in the Civil War. The consequences are somewhat *smaller* in this fight. But it does tend to drive apart former liturgical friends, and it does involve alliances around colors (though not blue and gray). The great, quaking question stirred up every year by Advent is this: Should the color be purple, or blue? Purple is the more traditional color, the same color used for Lent and deliberately so. Advent used to be associated with penitence and sacrifice just as Lent is. The thought at the time—and this goes back for centuries—was that Christians needed to sing somber Advent hymns and observe this time of solemnity (a season of purple) to be ready for Christ’s arrival on Christmas Eve. However, we hear another opinion from new-fangled, fashion-forward worship divas (most of them gay men—let’s be honest). They insist that Advent’s eager anticipation of Christ’s arrival deserves a different color than mournful preparation for Christ’s death. Nobody has claimed victory yet in this bitter dispute, so this time of year in some churches there’s purple, and in others there’s blue. It’s *tearing* us apart!

In today’s passage from Joel, we get a little purple *and* a little blue. The whole small book of Joel is his interpretation of national calamity as a sign of God’s judgment. The people have sinned and fallen away from righteousness. They pay lip service to God’s ways in worship, but follow their own desires the rest of their lives. Therefore, the prophet issues a firm, clear call for repentance. Joel adopts the voice of God, saying, “*return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.*” Returning to God requires repentance, a letting go of the things that keep us from God. What are the things that you and I need to repent of? On this Sunday, with its theme of peace, what nags at your conscience and *keeps* you from peace? Is it the need to feel important and the center of attention, so you end up working way more than you ought to? Is it wishing that voices for justice in the public square would “pipe down” or “give it a rest”, even though you think they’re generally right? Is it regret at going into debt this time of year, because the excuses to buy are too many and your self-control too weak? Is it coldness at a family member with whom you haven’t spoken in years? Is it worry about whether you’ll be found wanting in your own eyes or those of your children when the presents are unwrapped on Christmas morning? Is it anger at the person on the television who clearly has no idea about anything, but who cannot hear or take away the bitterness you yell in their direction? But God essentially says, through Joel, “leave all those false things, and many more that you could add. Return to *me* with all your heart.” Or [as Saint Augustine wrote](#), “Our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in [God].” Such restlessness keeps us occupied with ourselves, forgetful of our place in the universe, and ignorant of God. It’s one of the reasons we start worship in Advent with a time of centering. Centering ourselves returns us to God with all our hearts, and in that there is peace. That’s the purple: Advent repentance.

But then Joel shows blue too. He looks forward with anticipation to a promise so breathtaking it will transform the world. God says, *“I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.”* What results from repentance is worldwide, Spirit-filled movement. Out of the quiet, peaceful center we find when we are at rest in God, comes the universal invitation from all genders and all ages—slave or free—prophesying, dreaming and envisioning peace. The purple of repentance that leads to inner peace then turns outward again, calling us to make, speak, act and embody peace in the world. That is the new, Advent blue.

There are a million interpretations of what it looks like to move from inner to outer peace, manifesting it in the world. But the ones that catch at me most aren't the national or global visions of peace. Instead, it's the sort of peace-making that fills daily existence, as essential to life as drawing breath. Several years after the 9/11 attacks, when the US was deep into the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq, a professor had a poem taped to her door, and I finally stopped to read it one day. The poem is called [“Pray for Peace”](#), by Ellen Bass. She writes, in part:

*...With each breath in, take in the faith of those  
who have believed when belief seemed foolish,  
who persevered. With each breath out, cherish.  
Pull weeds for peace, turn over in your sleep for peace,  
feed the birds, each shiny seed  
that spills onto the earth, another second of peace.  
Wash your dishes, call your mother, drink wine.”  
Another place she says, “Make the brushing of your hair  
a prayer, every strand its own voice,  
singing in the choir on your head.  
As you wash your face, the water slipping  
through your fingers, a prayer: Water,  
softest thing on earth, gentleness  
that wears away rock.*

Truly embodying peace requires a centered devotion, and a steady conviction that asks with each action or choice in the world: “How does this make for peace?”

Finding peace and forgiveness within, manifesting peace outside when we go. None of this peacemaking is easy, and I could not make it so by preaching twice as long. What does it mean to live in peace, despite all that is about us in the world, and all that we carry with us in our hearts? The liturgy of the church today preaches that to us. In baptism, we are reminded of our own baptisms, and the ways that God has made peace, offered us fresh newness every day. In communion, the table where we gather and where our enemies gather as well, God makes peace and feeds us, so that we might feed the world with love and justice. Therefore, come to the table, remember your baptism daily, turn and return—giving over to God what is holding you back, what keeps you back from peace, and then when you go from this place, make peace by God's presence in the world.

Let us pray: *God of Advent peace, thank you for pouring out your spirit on all flesh—young and old, near and far, slave and free. Give us peace, that we may show your peace in Jesus' name. Amen.*