

Bristol Lutheran

Joel 2:12-13, 28-29, Luke 11:13

Advent 2

12-4-2016

How often do you feel stuck in the middle?

Not really on one side or the other.

Between light and darkness.

Between democrat and republican.

Between failure and success.

Between rich and poor.

Between mourning and celebration.

Between fake news and real news.

Between reality and fantasy.

Between fear and hope.

Between good and evil.

Between certainty and doubt.

Between saint and sinner.

Between pain and healing.

We are constantly living lives in the middle – really not on one end of the spectrum or the other.

We aren't really stuck in the middle – our lives are fluid, we don't usually live in the extremes. Yet with Life in the middle, I feel stuck. Like there is no way out of the middle.

And I so badly want to be out of the middle. I want more of the absolute that comes from being on one end or the other. The uncertainty in the middle makes me uncomfortable, helpless, confused.

I don't like not knowing.

The story from Joel, unfortunately doesn't help ease my anxiety.

In the first chapters, Joel has been laying out his prophecy for the day of the Lord, the apocalypse... it sounds a lot like revelation.

Our gospel story begins with the words... “yet even now...rend your hearts, repent, return.”

Basically, Joel says God who is powerful, great, is coming in the end, and it will be awesome, but sorry, we aren't there yet, so we have to live in the in-between time. I don't really want to wait until the end for things to get better.

“Yet even now...keep doing what you have been doing” – even if it feels like you may not get anywhere. Even if it feels like you take one step forward, and two steps back. Even if you don't think what you say or do makes any difference.

Joel is saying – even when you feel stuck in the middle – if you feel like you are running in place – keep running. Not out of insanity, but because it is in the middle, the rhythm and routine – that you may see God’s spirit poured out in ways unimagined.

And by the way, this is how you do it.

Keep coming back to God, even if you feel useless.

Keep praying, even if it feels unanswered.

Keep fighting, even if you feel apathetic and complacent.

Keep loving, even when you are tired.

Keep forgiving, even when you don’t want to.

Keep dreaming, even if they don’t come true.

Keep on keeping on.

Keep returning to God, until Christ returns to us.

We don’t do that on our own. But through the strength of a community of faith. With others like us in the middle of life. We do this with God’s strength. The Holy Spirit is given to those who ask! Christ reminds us, so we all ask God to pour out the gift of the spirit on everyone. This isn’t individual requests, but communal. We do this together.

Joel prophesies to the community, about life in the middle together....the reality of today, rending our hearts out to God, returning to God over and over and over again – not just outwardly, not a show, but returning, rending our hearts deeply to God, continuing to grind our lives of faith – in suffering and in hope.

As you rend, you are bringing whatever is in there - weeping, mourning. Uncertainty. Fear. Joy. Being fully and truly honest with who we are, our feelings and thoughts, our dreams and visions, our failings and disappointments. God can take it all.

So, I will admit my heart – because God can take it - I always want to impact people – yet I often feel like what's the point. I question and wonder, analyze and assess.

Does my job make a difference? Does church make any change? Are we doing all we can to raise Anya? Could I be a better spouse? A better son? Could I do more for myself? For our community? Can I fight harder for things that matter? What really does matter?

Often that path of analyzing leaves me depressed, overwhelmed, helpless, or useless. Like I am in the middle, and really have nowhere to go.

Yet, God's promise is found in the middle.

Even in the middle, uncertain times – when we may feel in a rut – is God not gracious? And merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love?

Didn't God put God's son – into the middle of life, into our midst – to pour out God's spirit on all of us – young/old, slave/free, sons/daughters, male/female.

Isn't Advent a reflection of life in the middle?

The struggle between incarnation and 2nd coming, between sadness and hope, between now, and not yet.

The dark uncertain time of advent – between thanksgiving and Christmas.

Advent recognizes a profound spiritual truth — that we need not fear the dark. Instead, wait. And while we wait, we stay active. We rend our heart, return to God. Light candles. Sing songs. Recite poetry. Say prayers. Tell the story of God's grace. And the hope to come.

We hope in this middle time - not for the stash of presents under the tree on Christmas morning. We hope for light, as we muddle through the darkness, wait for God to renew and heal the world for good, through a promise embodied in a baby born in a manger, fulfilled in the resurrection, and promised to come again to create a new heaven and new earth.

Advent holds the promise that the sun will rise, and that even after the bleakest, coldest, longest night, the light will break forth, as the new day arrives.

Do you feel stuck in the middle?

While we struggle daily, or celebrate daily, we continue on in faith, holding out for the last hope – that there will be a time when dreams and visions will come true, and tears are gone, when Christ returns. Until then, we live in the grace, mercy, steadfastness, and relentlessness of God in our lives together, today.