

Return to Sender
December 4, 2016
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

Ten years ago this Christmas my father gave me one of the most practical Christmas gifts of my life – a GPS. Now, remember, back then we didn't have smartphones, so GPS was cutting edge technology. I was in the early days of ministry here in Monroe and had a lot to learn about driving around town without getting lost. It was a nifty little tool that made my life a lot easier.

I realized at one point that my GPS might suggest an alternative route to a place that I thought I knew how to get to that would save time or gas. One foggy night I used it as I drove to Silver Lake, a place I had driven to a hundred times before. My GPS told me to take a left I never had taken before in the lovely little town of Kent. Instead of heeding clues to turn around and stay on the main roads I knew, I blindly followed it until I found myself on top of a mountain.

Under normal considerations this "road less traveled" may have been a spectacular choice. On that night, it was just about the worst navigation decision I ever made. As I climbed the hill in my Nissan Altima hybrid, the road beneath me changed from pavement to dirt. Add to that hazard a melting snow pack, ice and mud. There was no civilization as far as I could tell, and my cell phone battery was dead. It's a minor miracle that I made it off that mountain about an hour later!

On the journey of life and faith God gave the Israelites a map to follow they called the Law. It was given to the people to direct them onto roads that would lead to blessings and a deeper relationship with God and each another. But as we've seen throughout the biblical story, they had a hard time following the map. Sometimes they misread it and sometimes they just ignored it. They got lost by forgetting their God, abusing the poor and powerless and living self-focused lives.

So God sent the Israelites prophets, people who knew the roadmap back to God. The prophets cried out to the people, "*Hey, you're going the wrong way. You're running away from God. There's danger in that direction. Turn around. Go the other way.*" There's a biblical word for that kind of turning around. It's "repent".

To repent means to change one's mind and direction. To repent means to stop moving away from God, make a U-turn and start moving back toward God. Joel was one of the many other prophets whom God sent to call them to repent.

The book that bears Joel's name is a little one – a mere three chapters long. You'll find it tucked between two other prophets, Hosea and Amos. A little background... A massive plague of locusts had struck Israel. Their crops were gone. Their livestock was dying. The people were starving. Joel spoke into this disaster, telling the people that the locusts were God's judgment. He calls the people to repent, to turn around, to return to the Lord.

The truth is we're all like the Israelites. We get lost (even when following a GPS!) We move in directions that endanger us. Sometimes we're aware we're moving in the wrong direction, and sometimes we're just like sheep. We start in the safety of the shepherd's pasture, but we nibble a little grass here, and then a little over there, and then a little more over there, and before we know it we're lost. One little lie turns into a web of lies that we can't escape from. One risky purchase turns into a disaster of debt. A few nights of one too many cocktails at the end of a busy day turns into a bondage called addiction. That is not the will of God for us, and that's why we're called to live a life of constant course correction.

Repentance isn't about cleaning up your act so that God can let you back in the club. Repentance is about seeing yourself the way God sees you and allowing yourself to be changed by God's love. And it's not a one-time transaction, but a layered process.

God's plan is so much bigger than we might imagine. But Joel says the Spirit will be poured out on all people. It's an idea that is STILL scandalous today. Joel promises to us, in the midst of wanderings, that God is going to break down the oppressive social and political systems. God is going to bring dignity and equality to all people. God is going to restore the broken earth and our deep connection to it.

God's big plan is to reconcile all things and calls out, *"return to me. mend your heart. See these things the way I see them and come home."* Reconciliation begins with a deeply personal process of repentance. And when we realize that we are forgiven, and that God loves us for who we are, there is hope for our return.

But then, we find ourselves standing in Joel's sandals looking around at the war and violence and pain wondering, *"if I've been restored, then why is everything still so messed up"?*

That is when we hear God's longing for a deeper layer. *"Return to me in your relationships."* God longs for the reconciliation of all things - reconciliation between family members, between warring nations, between oppressive powers and those who are oppressed, between human beings and the delicate balance of the environment.

On this second Sunday of Advent we stand in the middle, looking at all that God has done so far but still longing for true peace. When Joel looked back and saw how God had restored the temple, that was good. But he still looked forward to the promised day of peace.

I don't know where you personally are on the journey of life today, but perhaps you hear this reflection as an invitation to pull over, pause and reflect. If you sense that you are on the wrong road, I hope that you don't react as I did on that mountaintop long ago. It was my inability to admit that I had made a mistake that got me stuck in the mud and ice, and it was a miserable way to spend an evening.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus has come, and is still coming to reconcile all things. For that, we are grateful. And yet, we know that we also can feel stuck, when we acknowledge there is still so much more to be done. God still longs for us to turn away from violence and fear. Today we rend our hearts and ask God to show us how to "return to Sender" and make a U-Turn towards the one who loves us most. May God's peace call us all home. Amen.