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This Advent has seemed the oddest of any year that I can remember. A pandemic. Virtual worship with only a few people in the sanctuary. And me, sitting here at home for this Sunday and next week due to having a positive COVID test result and entering quarantine. I had a very slight fever and a mild sore throat, but I began to wonder about the possibility of the coronavirus.

When I called to request a test and named my symptoms, I was told that I was on the borderline of needing a test. “But better safe than sorry,” the nurse told me, “so come and take the test.” When I received the phone call that my test results were positive, all the plans I had laid out for the coming weeks began to crumble.

“Now what?” I wondered. “It’s been difficult enough doing ministry during a pandemic, but now I’m supposed to figure out how to bring words of hope while in quarantine and while feeling tired?!”

I imagine the prophet Joel experienced a similar challenge as he tried to bring words of hope to the people of his day several hundred

years before the birth of Jesus. He began his book by writing:

Listen, you leaders
and everyone else
in the land.
Has anything like this
ever happened before?
³Tell our children!
Let it be told
to our grandchildren
and their children too.

When the prophet asked, “has anything like this even happened before?” his words seem to echo what many of us have been wondering about our situation. This Advent is not like any we’ve seen before, so I’m curious what the prophet might have to say to us today.

One writer highlighted the situation in which Joel lived as the people faced the destruction of invading armies and environmental stress: “Land plundered and burned, animals crying out to God for water ... all of earth seems to lament. With resources devoured, [the nation] will not have anything material to offer in worship of the Lord.”¹

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Although the details of our situation differ from Joel, we may find ourselves feeling exhausted and depleted as did the people of his day, for we have also been plundered by an enemy, though not by armies swarming our land. Instead, a small virus has invaded not only our nation, but the entire world. Our whole planet is plagued with this common foe, and wouldn't it be amazing if we learned from this experience that we really are one people, all children of One God?

As Joel spoke to the people in crisis, he invited them to return to God, but rather than depending on the ritual of tearing their clothing as a sign of sorrow, which was a common practice at that time, the prophet suggested that they tear their hearts instead.

This seems like an odd idea—tearing of the heart—but it seems to suggest that God was searching for an opening in the hearts of the people during their crisis. Have you ever noticed that sometimes we draw closer to God when we're facing a huge problem, when facing an

obstacle larger than we can push aside by ourselves?

Sometimes we're so independent and self-sufficient that we think we can do without God or anyone else, but when tragedy strikes, our hearts seem to open as we reach out to God and one another, and that's when we discover the true meaning of love—our interconnection to God and one other that can never be severed. Even in times of crisis, God continues to love us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

At this time of year, though, it's so easy to shift our attention to other things we think we love—certain presents we want under the tree, Christmas decorations, the newest gadgets, holiday traditions that we've done every year for generations. Any of those things can disappear, which we may drastically experience this year as we realize that our family gatherings cannot be the same as before. Even church won't be the same. Christmas Eve won't be in either of sanctuaries, but will be prerecorded and available for you to watch in a small gathering in the safety of your home. Although we are preparing a Christmas Eve kit for you to soon pick up for use on

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that evening, it just won't feel the same as being in church. And yet, regardless of where or how we gather, we celebrate the gift of God's love that came in the form of a small baby, which went missing one year as a father and his daughter were setting up their live-sized nativity scene in front of their house.

"Daddy, guess what's missing!"

"What?" her father asked, as he fastened Joseph to a pole for support.

"The baby Jesus," his daughter replied, twisting her face into a frown. "Daddy, if we can't find Jesus, there's no need for us to put up the manger scene at all."²

She knew that God's present of love reflected in the birth of Jesus was the best gift of all. Hundreds of years earlier the prophet Joel also reminded humanity of God's love as he said, God "is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full

of faithful love, and ready to forgive" (2:13). God offered another gift as well as the prophet envisioned:

"I will pour out my spirit
upon everyone;
your sons and your daughters
will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.

I believe in dreams. I believe in visions. I believe in love. Even in the midst of a pandemic. Even when days seem uncertain, as a Jewish poet reminds us with the words written on a wall during the Holocaust "I believe in the sun, even when the sun is not shining."

I believe God's gifts remain with us always, whether in person or gathered virtually. May we all continue to believe that God's Spirit moves among us, offering us love no matter what we may face.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/joel-gods-promised-spirit/commentary-on-joel-212-13-28-29-3>

² Adapted from Hodgin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #129.