

“Render and Return”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Joel 2:12-13, 28-29  
December 4, 2016  
Second Sunday of Advent

It was a chilly November night in 2008. Amber and I were living in the itty-bitty village of Menden, which was a section of Sankt Augustin, which was a sleepy suburb of Bonn, Germany. I was preparing a feast in our impossibly small kitchen when I heard the distinct sound of a snare drum *rat-a-tat-tat-ing*, and then a brigade of fifes playing a tune. I hollered up to the living room, “The British are coming!”

Amber, always the less reactive one, suggested we take a look out the window before hanging a lantern - “one if by land.” Away to the window I flew like a flash, tore open the shutters and threw up the sash. But all I could see was a procession that included flaming torches, scores of small children, and the aforementioned marching musicians.

Pushing *Village of the Damned* back into the recesses of my brain, we grabbed our coats and headed out to see what fascinating cultural display we were missing. As we searched for a good spot to catch it all, we ran into a friend who helped us figure out what was going on. It turns out it was St. Martin’s Day - November 11th. Martin of Tours died on that day in 397; he was a Roman soldier who converted to Christianity as an adult and became a monk. Legend tells how, before his conversion, he tore his own cloak in half to save a beggar from dying in a snowstorm. Martin dreamt that night that Jesus was wearing the half-cloak and saying to the angels: “Here is Martin, the Roman soldier, who is not baptized; he has clothed me.” I’m sure you can relate. Haven’t we all had that dream?

St. Martin is a big deal in some parts of Europe, and the tradition in Germany is to have a parade of children with paper lanterns, led by St. Martin on a horse. Adult torchbearers led the way, and St. Martin waved from atop his horse while wearing his very impressive cloak. The children followed, organized by grade and class, with each class having made a different style of glowing paper lantern. We followed the procession as it wound its way back to the school and onto the athletic fields. There, a ring of barricades surrounded a roaring bonfire, complete with *Feuerwehrmänner* (firefighters) to make sure nobody got hurt. After the parade, the children and their parents headed to the school, where the celebration continued. But soon the kids went out to ring doorbells. The last part of the tradition is that the kids sing songs about St. Martin, and in exchange you give them candy.

St. Martin’s Day is more connected to us than we might think. In the early Church - the first three hundred or so years of Christianity - there was only one holy feast day, and that was Easter. It was celebrated once a year, of course, but it was celebrated weekly as well - you’ve possibly heard a pastor refer to each Sunday as a “little Easter” - each sabbath being a celebration of Christ’s resurrection. Gradually, other events in the life of Jesus, as well as the death days of the saints, worked their way into the church’s calendar. It was the middle of the 4th Century when Christmas became a holy feast day, and as it spread and grew in importance, the Church started to teach people to prepare for it in the same way they prepared for Easter. Easter, of course, had Lent - with its penitence and fasting. By the mid-5th

Century, Christians were observing St. Martin's Lent - a period that began at the end of November 11th. Soon, this period came to be known as Advent, and eventually it became shorter, especially in the Western Church.

This *Advent* is a season of return. God says through Joel "return to me with all your heart...Return to the Lord, your God." We return to family this month. We return to memories. And, for a lot of people, we return to church. We see it on Christmas Eve when the pews are filled with friends we haven't seen in awhile and with folks who haven't seen the inside of a church in years. Anyone who shows up to church once a month is allowed - by 13th Century papal decree I believe - to make jokes about these people. We call them the "C & E" crowd, or the "Chreasters."

But I have a hunch that, at least in some cases, it's more than family pressure or guilt or soul-stirring music that brings these folks into church doors in December. I think there's something more cosmic that happens during Advent. There's a stirring. There's a disturbance in the force. A signal is sent out from on high - maybe it's angels singing in a frequency we can't quite conceive - and the little homing chip that's been placed in each of us starts to beep. Beep. Beep. Go home. Return. Return to the Lord your God. Return - for your God "is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Return - for the people who tease about your absence do sincerely miss you. Return - for the Word of God is preparing to enter the world as it has in the past, as it does at the table, and as it will in a future we cannot comprehend. Return - for their is spirit to be poured out. Prophecy and dreams and visions await. Return.

God says through Joel, "return to me with all your heart." Now that sounds awfully intimate if you're talking to someone who has returning to do. You don't return unless you've been away. And, my friends, haven't we been away? Perhaps we left the church because it ceased to be meaningful or it ceased to take priority over sports or because someone hurt us or because there was hypocrisy there. Or maybe we're there every time the doors are opened and we serve and we give the first fruits and we have pretty much nailed the loving your neighbor as yourself thing. Or we're somewhere in the middle. Whatever our story, we have been away from God's intention for us. We have been away from God's vision and dream and prophetic word. We have hurt others or stood idly by while hurting was done. We have failed to feed one another. We have downplayed our own role in God's dream because we have listened to voices that have said that our hearts are not worth anyone's time, certainly not the time of the Creator.

"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." Or, you know, if your St. Martin, rend your heart by rending your clothing. Return with all your heart and tear it open. That is, in fact, intimate and risky and requires vulnerability. Yet it's what that little chip inside of you - I'm fairly certain it's called your heart - is asking you to do.

Every preacher develops over time a good dozen or so points that they can't resist but hammering home every chance they get. In the two-and-a-third years I've been here, I've mentioned at least a dozen times how the heavens were opened at Jesus's baptism. In the Gospel of Mark, the text says the heavens were "torn apart." I love that. I love how God just rends the fabric of space and time in order to be with us.

And so it's not surprising that God asks the same of us. If we return, how are we to meet our God? How can we possibly prepare? I sometimes check my teeth for spinach before making a telephone call! I'm not ready to encounter the God of Gods. O Lord, how shall I meet you?

"...with all your heart...rend your heart." God asks us to lay it all out. To not hold back. To not be stingy. If we dare to return to God, we must do so with the whole of our hearts, torn open, unafraid to show God the pain and the guilt and the shame and the stuff that neither English nor German has a word for yet - the stuff we're pretty sure *nobody* else has in their heart.

When church people hear the word "repent," we tend to think of Lent. But the original Advent - St. Martin's Lent - had some good repentance stuff in there that got softened over time. It's kind of a shame. "Repent" doesn't get used much outside walls like these, and yet we don't really understand it much ourselves. In the New Testament's Greek, the word we turn into "repent" is *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*). It literally means "a change of mind" or "a higher mind." But when the Hebrew Bible says to repent, it's using the same root as Joel does: שׁוּבוּ (*shub*) - "return."

In Lent, in repentance we are seeking to understand what God is doing and what we have done in the solemnity that leads up to Holy Week. We are striving for new minds, new thinking, in the face of the violence of the cross. And, on the third day, God brings us things we cannot comprehend, even in our newly expanded minds.

In Advent, in repentance we are returning to God with our full hearts torn open, seeking a God who will give us healing and hope, who will proclaim peace and grace, who will demand justice and love and comfort. We seek these things from God because, in our time away and in the rending of our hearts, we have discovered that these things are what we need.

And so we return. To our hometowns and to our quirky families and to the church we might have left but which has never quite left our hearts, we return. We return to see if God will show up with anything for us. We return to see if God truly is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We return to see if there is anything new for us in the Son of God. We return to listen for a drumbeat and bleating sheep and the cry of an infant and this singing in a frequency we can't decipher. Heart in hand, we return to a backwater town called Bethlehem. We follow a star. And the closer we get, the harder it is to shake the sense that God has been with us the entire time. Amen.