12 Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow;
13 tear your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive.
28 After that 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.
29 In those days, I will also pour out my spirit on the male and female slaves. - Common English Bible

Several years ago, in the midst of Advent, I caught a snippet of a story corpus conversation on NPR. That conversation was between a former prisoner, Robert Sanchez, and a social worker who helps prisoners in the transition back to society after release from prison, Fred Davie. These two recalled meeting in a small windowless room in Sing Sing, which Robert suggested didn't look like much of an educational setting, but, in his words, "that room created magic." 16 men would gather there with Fred, most of these men were in for 15-20 years. Robert had a 15-year to life sentence for a non-violent drug charge with no prior record— which Fred couldn't believe was true, but it was. Fred was impressed by how well read this group of men was— Robert suggested there wasn't much else for them to do in prison.

This was an Advent story. Listen to this direct quote from Robert: "I think I survived it by always having hope. What is life without hope? Even an iota of light can go a long way. And my first impression of you was here's this beautiful kind man who, for whatever reason, just represents hope to me." Fred was taken aback. He had no idea he had had such an impact on Robert. When Robert first got home he was scared and Fred was a lifeline— he could always call Fred and admit he didn't understand life; he could ask dumb questions and never be called dumb. Fred suggested that he has always had people that were in his corner every step of the way... not a father, but a mother on whose front porch he was always welcome no matter how messed up his life might be.
Robert said "I have that from you, but I didn't have that from anywhere else." Robert found Fred to be a father figure—someone to guide him. Fred commended Robert for getting farther in his 16 years post-prison than most people ever do. And then Robert wrapped up the conversation saying "Yeah, I've got to be reminded every now and then. There are times that I get bitter and angry at my situation. I live a pretty lonely life, and if I'm not careful, I can fall into these doldrums. But just you being there to be able to listen to me and say 'You know what, you're going to be o.k.' It's a tremendous gift, and I'm a lucky man."

Surviving by hope. About a month before I heard this story I participated in a workshop on suicide prevention in which I heard over and over again that there are many factors that lead to suicide, but the two most significant are a loss of hope and a loss of social connection. This relationship between Robert and Fred demonstrates the power of both hope and social connection— and the relationship between these. It was Robert's connection with Fred, unique in his life, that gave him hope and it is hope that allowed him to survive 15 years in prison, and 16 long, lonely years after prison.

The prophet Joel spoke his message to the people of Israel in the midst of a very difficult season—a locust plague had destroyed their crops. The people of Israel understood such plagues to be punishment from God for sin—after all this was one of the afflictions cast upon Egypt, their oppressors, in the process of Moses trying to get the people out of slavery at God's command. Joel paints a picture, poetically, in chapter one of this book (perhaps good reading for this afternoon) of utter devastation visited upon the people. Joel interprets this devastation as a sign that the day of the Lord, a frightful day of final judgment, is near.

"Yet even now..." our reading today began, yet even in the midst of this devastation... even though Israel has strayed from faithfulness to their faithful God who delivered them from bondage in Egypt... "Yet even now" there is hope... God calls to the people "return to me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow." The picture is of a gathered assembly for shared repentance and grief. Not just outward displays of regret— the traditional tearing of clothes— but true inward sorrow, regret—a tearing of the heart. "Come home" God says, "Come home by gathering together to weep..." That might sound dreadful. We Presbyterians aren't known for bringing a lot of
public display of emotion to worship. But God suggests through the prophet Joel that this is part of how we come home to our God who "is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love and ready to forgive." We come home by coming together and being honest about how much we hurt— we hurt because of wrong we have done or right we have left undone; we hurt because of losses we have suffered; we hurt because of the devastation we witness in the world; we hurt. And we have reason to express sorrow. And there is power in doing so together...

On Wednesday, December 23, in lieu of our usual evening prayer order, we'll be hosting a Blue Christmas service on zoom. This is an opportunity to bring all the hard feelings that sometimes are most acute in the days leading up to Christmas before God and in the presence of your community. In an ordinary year, the cheer and lights and jolly of the season can grate on those freshly grieving or struggling to make ends meet or living through some sort of nightmare. And we all know, this has not been an ordinary year. Many more of us may be feeling hard feelings this Christmastide than ever before. We need hope. And we need social connection. May all our Advent and Christmas worship, and our new Blue Christmas service convey both.

God, through Joel, suggests that when the people come home to God in this way... God will restore Israel... new life will come to Israel; there is hope... hope beyond the devastation then seen. Hope. And God suggests that beyond even the wonderful promise of the restoration of Israel is the promise of the renewal of Israel through the outpouring of God's Spirit on everyone— so that everyone, male and female, young and old, slave and free, everyone can speak God's word, and dream dreams and catch visions of God's hopeful future.

Friends, we believe that that promise has been realized. God is faithful. God's Spirit has been poured out after the resurrection and ascension of Christ— in baptism God's spirit is poured out anew on each new member of Christ's family. That means that everyone in this fellowship, everyone is capable of speaking God's Word and catching God's vision. It seems to me that at this particular moment in history even we who are children of God, blessed with the indwelling of God's Spirit, we are longing, yearning for light. We need a renewal of Christ's Spirit living among us, a growth in reflective faithfulness.
So thank God it’s Advent. This is a great time to return to God with all our hearts—and to be prepared for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit: the same Spirit who hovered over the waters at the time of creation; the same Spirit that allowed Mary to birth God in human flesh, Jesus the Christ; the same Spirit that descended on Jesus in his baptism and drove him into the wilderness; the same Spirit that filled the disciples on that first Pentecost and allowed them to speak of God's power and love; the same Spirit on whom we call every time we gather at Christ's table, as we will do again momentarily. We aren't waiting for a remembrance of something that happened long ago. We're waiting, longing... for something to happen NOW. In and through us... a new and stronger faithfulness in us that reflects the faithfulness of our God to the world. And by the Spirit of the faithful God, so it will be. So be of good hope, friends... for hope is that which will allow us to do much more than survive.

To listen to the full story from Robert Sanchez and Fred Davie and to listen to other great stories check out https://storycorps.org/ Their story in particular can be found at this link- https://storycorps.org/listen/fred-davie-and-robert-sanchez-161202/