

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, December 3, 2023

So, as Pastor Courtnay just shared with us, we begin this new season, this new year in the life of the church, as we celebrate together—Advent. Throughout this season we are going to focus on a new worship series that we've entitled *A Weary World Rejoices*, from that much beloved hymn that we'll sing as we draw closer to Christmas Eve. It strikes me that the world in which we live right now—it just has an air of heaviness that we probably haven't had in a...in a while. In the conversations I've had with some of you, and in my own experience of the world, it...it feels heavier. And so what does it look like, what does it mean, for people of faith to indeed trust that there can be joy even in the midst of the heaviness and the difficulty of the world? That's part of what we claim together during the season of Advent. So we're going to wrestle for four Sundays with what it means to truly believe that Christ brings joy even in the midst of our weariness and the weariness of our world.

This morning our scripture will be from the Prophet Jeremiah. We're going to read together from the 33rd chapter. Before we do that, though, let us go to God In prayer.

Let us pray.

Gracious Spirit, as you moved across the waters of creation, we pray that you might move once again this morning amongst us. Move amongst us and within us to quiet us, that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might respond. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

So we're in Jeremiah 33. We're going to read verses 10-11, and then move ahead a few and read 14-16 together.

*The LORD proclaims: You have said about this place, "It is a wasteland, without humans or animals." Yet in the ravaged and uninhabited towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, **11** the sounds of joy and laughter and the voices of the bride and the bridegroom will again be heard. So will the voices of those who say, as thank offerings are brought to the LORD's temple, "Give thanks to the LORD of heavenly forces, for the LORD is good and his kindness lasts forever." I will bring back the captives of this land as they were before, says the LORD.*

*The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. **15** In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land. **16** In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The LORD Is Our Righteousness.*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, the prophet begins with the difficulty of the current world. The text actually begins in desolation. The people describing their own land say, "It is a wasteland without humans or animals." That's the Common English translation. Some of y'all might have a different one in the pews there or on your phone. The point is the prophet begins in a place that is void of goodness,

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void of life, in need of some divine presence. I think it's an important starting point for us even if it's a heavy one in this season of Advent, and even as we begin our worship series together. The prophet begins with the difficulty of the world that the prophet is speaking to. If we're, I think, honest, if we're paying attention to our world—and whether that be the wider world or even here in Memphis in our city—if we're paying attention, then we might over the last several weeks or months, we might have felt at various times the same sort of weariness that the people of God felt, to whom Jeremiah was speaking, a weariness at the difficulties that we are having to navigate as a community, weariness at violence and poverty. There's a weariness that seems to thread itself throughout all of human history, but if we're paying attention right now, then perhaps we feel it more acutely. There's a weariness when we have to send out an announcement to shut down schools just a...a block over from us, because a man is making his way down Peabody with a...a weapon, a gun. I understand that he was exercising a right that our legislature has given to him, but we ought not believe that that is normal. So there's a weariness when Idlewild Elementary has to go on lockdown or GSL has to go on lockdown or parents have to get text messages about what is going on with their children and in their neighborhood. There's a weariness when we pay attention to things going on on our state level that threaten our public schools. There's a weariness when we pay attention to a broader landscape here in America, but also across the world, a rising tide of anti-LGBTQ legislation and and thought, rising violence against our Muslim and Jewish siblings. There's a weariness when we're paying attention into the world and a heaviness that comes about it and about us. And that's in the world. It says nothing about what you are navigating in your lives.

There's another sort of heaviness that comes about in this season. If you were with us at the beginning of November, we had a whole evening devoted to, really, the difficulties that come along with the joys of this particular season. Advent and Christmas are beautiful and good, and yet they also can bring a whole host of other more difficult emotions to us. And if we read this text more closely, and we hear the people saying, 'Look at this place; it's devoid of life. There are no humans; there are no animals; there's no laughter; there's no joy.' If we're truthful with ourselves, then we all have places in our lives where we feel that love and laughter have left the building...and will not return. For some it might be a friendship; for others it might be a relationship, a marriage. We might feel that love and laughter have left our families. In our gathering we might have gotten sideways with a classmate or a friend. We might feel that way at work or even here at church. I was talking to a friend this week who described her family of origin as chaotic during the holiday season. Living with a parent who was an alcoholic, um things weren't ever really good, but things got even more difficult during the anxieties that came with the holiday season. Thanksgiving to Christmas was a difficult time.

For the people of God who are hearing the prophet, the land is desolate. But the prophet tells them that they must be willing to name and see what is going on in their world, but the prophet doesn't leave them there. The prophet begins by repeating back to them their own descriptions." It is a wasteland without humans and animals," but then the prophet draws them further. Yet—"in the ravaged and uninhabited towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, the sounds of joy and laughter, and the voice of the bride and the bridegroom will again be heard." The whole thing

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turns on one word—yet. You look out upon your world. The desolation is real. The prophet says, 'I'm not denying to you that; it is scary. You want for something more and better—'yet.' And in that one word there comes for us and for the people of God to whom the prophet was speaking, there comes a measure of hope—hope that would help us to light a candle this morning. If we're honest with each other and with ourselves, there are probably places in our lives where we need to hear - 'yet.'

I've resigned myself that I'm never going to talk to that person again. Yet....
I guess it's always going to be this way with my parents. Yet....
We've been working too hard for too long against poverty and crime. Yet....

Each of us has our desolate places, and yet God still holds our hope, hope for that which is yet to come. That same friend who described the anxiety of her home life during the holiday season, she said, "There was one thing I looked forward to though—the week leading up to Christmas Eve. We would, uh, about 10:00 at night, because my mom liked to drive at night, we would all pile in our our big station wagon, and this was before seat belts, so she would lay down the back seat, and we'd stack me and my two brothers long ways in our sleeping bags, and we would drive the eight hours back to my grandparents' home. And my grandparents' home held for me all the hope and possibility that the world could muster. In my grandparents home there was no arguing; it wasn't allowed. At my grandparents home everyone was going to have a present waiting on them. At my grandparents' home there was going to be plenty of food. And, so, every time we grabbed the sleeping bags and rolled them out into the back of the wagon, I knew that there was—yet—a possibility of goodness and hope and life."

This morning we celebrate that hope—Advent hope. It's a sort of expectant 'edge of your seat' waiting that we're engaged in, because it's hopeful. It's leaning forward into the work of God in the world. It's a sort of hope that the prophet, I believe, is inviting the people of God into, in and through the words that we read this morning in Jeremiah, to even...to imagine even amongst the difficulties of their present day, to imagine the possibilities of God in the world. I said the whole thing turns on 'yet,' and that's true, but it's not the whole truth, because in verse 14 the Prophet, after describing the laughter and love and joy that will come back into the place, the prophet says, "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, there is going to be a time. There will be a day when God will work and raise up a righteous branch from David's line. This one will bring justice and righteousness into the land.' A professor at Austin Theological Seminary describes it this way."The question that the prophet asks of the people— what if there was a person who could create another kind of empire in the world over and against the empire that you are living under, People of God, a socio-political system that aimed to execute justice for all people, where everyone can be safe, be saved, and live in safety, where there is fairness and equal distribution of material goods. This is the empire God has Jeremiah imagine for the people, an empire governed by a person called The Lord is Our Righteousness. To the troubles that the people were experiencing, the prophet says, "There will be another that will come that will lay out before you a way of moving through the world that is

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just and good and righteous.” Every trouble of your world, every trouble of your lives– for each and every one of those, the Divine still has ‘yet’ something else to do. Maybe the prophet wants us to hear the same thing this morning. Maybe the prophet wants us to make space for the possibilities of God in Christ Jesus this Advent season. Maybe we need to make room for those possibilities, for the way that we view our community or our nation, or maybe we have to make room for those possibilities amongst our family, or in a marriage, or amongst friends, or even in our lives of faith. Mary Oliver has this beautiful line. She says, “Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable.” And I love that line, because what it reminds us of is what it means to have a little bit of space hewn in our hearts for that which we can't fully understand, that which we can't fully describe, but that which God can and is doing in the world and in our lives. Maybe that's what this season of Advent is supposed to enable within each of us. Maybe what God is asking of us right now is for a community of people, let's say 300 or so who gather on a Sunday at 11, who are willing to look out upon the world, their community, their nation, and the greater world and be willing to say–‘yet.’ The hurt is real, the division is real, the air is heavy, ‘yet.’ I'm not sure how it's going to happen. I know you don't know how it's going to happen either– ‘yet.’ We imagine this is all for naught– ‘yet.’ Maybe what our community needs and what God is asking of us right now is that in this Advent season we might leave room in our hearts for the unimaginable, and that we might trust that there is still work yet to be done by the Divine– in us and around us and for the building of the kingdom.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.