

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, December 1, 2024

As we continue in our worship this day and as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, just a note for us. As we begin our Advent season, we also begin a new sermon series we've entitled Holiday Gatherings. Y'all are probably familiar with Matthew 18 where Jesus told his disciples, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." So if we take the words of Our Savior Jesus seriously, then we must believe that every gathering, every time we gather with our neighbors, is an opportunity to experience the very presence of God; so our Advent series is going to help us explore how God shows up in scripture and what the story of God's presence amongst God's people teaches us about the significance of the Incarnation. This morning, as Joshua shared with our children, we are going to listen together and observe together how the prophets show up as God's vessels amongst God's people. We're going to read a series of the prophets, first Jeremiah and then Malachi and then Micah. As we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, let us join our hearts in prayer.

Good and gracious Spirit, meet us here at the beginning of this new liturgical year. At the beginning of the season of Advent, meet us here with your peace. Meet us here with your comfort. Meet us here with your challenge. Open our ears that we might hear what it is you have to speak to us this day, not just to us but your whole church. 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 God shows up through the prophets. God shows up through the presence and the proclamation of prophetic voices. Nearly half of our Old Testament, or the Hebrew scripture, is devoted to the prophetic words. 17 of the 39 books of what we consider the Old Testament—they are prophetic messages from God. In the Hebrew text the prophets are portals; they are entryways for the grace and power of God to show up in the world. God, then, we believe is very present amongst God's people through the words of the prophets. The prophets were the very presence of God to God's people over time. All the texts that we're going to read this morning, all three of them, they have a common thread. Each of the prophets, if you'll spend some time going through the Hebrew text, they have different specific contexts to which they are preaching. Some are preaching to a group who has been exiled to a kingdom divided. Others, once that group of Hebrews has been drawn back together and into one holy place together, each have different contexts and different messages to carry, but there are common themes that are woven throughout all of the prophetic messages. One that we want to look to particularly this morning is the theme that 'something is coming.' The prophets want the people to know that something is coming into the world, specifically something holy and something born of God. That something is making its way into the world. It's coming. The prophets want the people to be aware, to know and to hold that truth within themselves.

Jeremiah was prophesying to a people divided and exiled. To those people God sends the Prophet Jeremiah. In chapter 33: 14-16 of his prophecy Jeremiah says,

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to

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spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

God's people found themselves displaced from their homes quite literally in a physical sense but also their spiritual home. They were divided within themselves, and so Jeremiah comes along and says to them "God's grace is on the way. God's grace is coming into the world, and you probably cannot see it right now." So Jeremiah uses a particular illustration—this idea of a branch springing up for David. God's grace is something that grows over time, Jeremiah is telling the people. You might not notice it; you might not see it, but there will be a time when it will spring forth from the ground and you won't be able to deny it anymore. What I want you to know is that even while you are exiled, even while you are divided, even while you are in the midst of trouble, God is growing something within you and in the world. It's a hopeful message for the people and perhaps for us this morning. Perhaps you find yourself far away from the place you want to be, far away from the place that gives you joy and life, far away from the place that makes you feel like you fully belong. Maybe you are displaced yourself this morning, and if so then the Prophet Jeremiah has a hopeful word, a word that was spoken thousands of years ago to a people in a situation not too dissimilar from yours. This word will come true. A righteous branch will spring up, and the people will actually be gathered back together.

That's who Malachi is speaking to—a people who have been drawn back into the holy place together as one. They have returned from exile, and just as quickly as they have returned from exile, returned to the place that is their home when they felt more at home within themselves spiritually, physically, emotionally, all those things, they quickly fall back into old habits. It's an interesting thing for us to think about, because in a month we'll celebrate the turning of a new year, and we'll make all these sorts of resolutions, right? But today we celebrate the New Year of the Church, and it gives us this opportunity to see something brand new. And yet we hear the prophet speaking to a people who've been drawn back together, and they fall back right into their old habits; and so God sends Malachi, and Malachi says to the people that if you want to experience God's grace, you have to understand that that grace is going to require something of you. Malachi says:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like washers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years.

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I love the image that Malachi brings to the people. This grace will sit as a refiner, a purifier of silver and “he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.” The people do not think that grace is going to require anything of them. They are ready to fall back in just the way they used to be. Malachi says to them ‘You are about to be refined, purified, in fact.’ How often do we ask for God to do something in our lives and then not expect to have to change anything about our lives? We want God to magically do something within us without actually making any decisions about what it means to be refined or changed or even purified. What Malachi tells the people is that if you want to experience the grace of God active in your life, you have to understand it's going to expect something of you. You are going to be refined. You are going to be changed. This is a challenging word to the people and, perhaps, a challenging word to us this day. We ought not expect for our lives to be changed by the grace of God unless we are open to that grace actually changing us. The definition of insanity—we all know it—it's doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. We do the same thing with our spiritual lives. We expect something to change, but we don't commit ourselves in any way; and the prophet says that there is a purifier that is coming, one that will refine us as well.

This is a challenging word to the people and perhaps to us. And so the prophets come again, this time in the voice of Micah, to say that even with all of this change that will come your way, God's grace is going to provide for you. God's grace is going to nurture security and even peace within you. Micah 5: 2-5 says:

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

*Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth,
and he shall be the one of peace.*

It's a reassuring word to God's people and, perhaps, for us as we stand on the precipice of this new season, moving into Advent expectant of the coming of Christ in our lives. I wonder what it is we find ourselves navigating this day. I wonder how the prophet's words greet us this day. Are we wrestling with a relationship, wrestling with the end of a school year or a school semester, wrestling with the beginning of a new job or a new season in a relationship, wrestling

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with our faith? The prophets meet the people and say you might not see the growth that is happening, but there will be a chute that will come up from Jesse, so trust that God is growing something within you. Trust also that that thing which God is growing is going to require something of you, a change, a refinement, a purification of sorts. You'd best be open to it, because what we do know and what we trust, the prophets tell the people, is that this God of Grace who's going to ask something of you is also going to sustain you, nourish you in this change and in this new season. The Prophet's words to the people—they come in different seasons, they comfort, they challenge, they reassure. This past week I was celebrating, as many of you did, Thanksgiving. I got to go down to Mississippi. In Mississippi there were oysters that had already been shucked and wonderful turkey that had already been cooked, right? I got to enjoy a delicious meal with an Idlewild family down there. I didn't know as I made my way down to Tunica that I was going to learn a new word, but the first thing that this church member did when I arrived was they said, "I have a new word for you. I think you can make it useful in the season of Advent." I said "ok." She said, "It's a word that probably you've never heard and probably most of Idlewild hasn't heard —apricity." Have y'all heard that word—apricity? Oh, good. She was right. Apricity means the warmth of sun in winter. The warmth of sun in winter. She went through the whole history of the word—how it had been invented in the middle of the 1800s by this gentleman who actually wrote a dictionary. So we put it in there, right, so we could get a prominent place. It didn't catch on, and so it's not a word that most of us have used before, right, but I thought it particularly appropriate. The words of the prophets are to the people like the warmth of sun in winter. They move out into a place in their lives that feels cold and void, and then there is sunlight and it warms their face. I'm not sure what cold you move out into in this season, but what I know is that the sun is coming to light us and warm us in this time. I know that God is growing something in you when you cannot sense it. I know that that will, that grace that is growing in you is going to ask something of you, but what I know is that that same God that warms the face in the midst of the coldness of and the chill of winter will also sustain you in the new thing that is coming into being.

Let's pray together.

You are present through the prophets, hopeful as you are, challenging as you are, reassuring as you are. You are present through the prophets. And we learn something about the way that you work in the world, about the work that you are up to, and about how it will change each and every one of us. Let your words be to us the warmth of sun in winter this day, oh God. Bring clarity and bring light through your prophetic promise. For we sit expectant that you are doing something, something holy and something good in our lives and in the world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.