

12-03-2023 First Sunday of Advent

Words of Worship --

Welcome! It's good to be back together again for worship after a holiday and a snow day! This morning we'll hear from the prophet Jeremiah – another ancient voice that's more contemporary and timely than one might imagine! It's also a time for us to be together, to grieve and support one another as the shocking news of Myron Hiebert's death sinks in and becomes a reality for us. It's precisely at times like these that we need each other more than ever. This morning we'll be reminded – again – of God's everlasting love and grace. We'll be reminded of some of the reasons we have to be thankful and generous. We didn't get to have our service that is specific to Thanksgiving, but really, there are no limits on our generosity and gratefulness. Let us live and give generously and with deep gratitude.

Opportunities for Celebration and Service

- Myron Hiebert's service has been planned for this coming Saturday, Dec. 9. The visitation will be here on Friday evening from 6-8 in the chapel. The private, family burial will happen on Saturday morning at 10 and the service will be at 11 followed by a lunch.
- The Daughters of Grace Christmas brunch has been postponed indefinitely – perhaps we can think about an event later in the winter, after the first of the year sometime. The committee will keep us all posted.
- Sr. Coffee next Friday, Dec. 15 at 3:00 p.m.

Call to Worship --

Opening Hymn - #117 *We Give Thanks Unto You*

Lighting the Advent Candle | Peace Prayer (Matt, Laura, Lillian, Greyson)

Advent Hymn -- #229 *Unexpected and Mysterious*

Children's Story – Laura Unrau

Worship Music – Julianna, Jacob, Karen

Offering Prayer – Comfort, comfort your people, O God. These words take on a new meaning this morning. As we offer these gifts of money and also the gifts of our time, our talents and our passions, we thank you for the abundance out of which we give. And we ask for an abundance of comfort – today and in the days to come. Amen.

Morning Prayer --

Loving God, we are grateful to be gathered here this morning, in this space, with one another. We thank you for this Sabbath day, for a time set aside, a time that offers a different rhythm, a day that's different than the others, some moments for rest and reflection and worship, for play and relaxation. Thank you that on the seventh day – YOU rested – and you invite us to do the same.

We're grateful for friends and family, for those we love, many of whom we spent time with this past week, some of us traveling, some of us hosting, for a time of giving thanks and being together. We're grateful for safe travels and for the opportunities to travel – and then to return home safely.

Oh, God we ask for your presence and your comfort for those who may be alone or lonely during these holidays. May we – and all who are followers of Jesus – be your presence, your hands and feet, your heart and love in the world. Help us to be sensitive, hospitable, thoughtful, showing care to those around us.

We pray particularly for those who are grieving losses. Some are grieving the loss of a job, some are grieving the loss of a significant relationship, some of us are relinquishing hopes or dreams we had that, for whatever reasons, now don't seem possible to pursue. Some of us are grieving those who have died and are missing them fiercely, deeply. As we struggle to comprehend Myron's loss, we bring you our broken and confused hearts. We offer to you this grief of a loss so unexpected and so fast that we can scarcely get our heads around it. And then, we remember, God, that life is fleeting and we do well to not take even one day for granted. O God, be with Ann, be with Garrett and Brittany, Elliot and Regan. Be with Weston and Courtney, Wyatt and Haydin. Be with Lucas and Michelle, with Sandy and Steve, Lynell and Vickie. Be with Merlin and Velma and the many other family members and friends. Comfort them and let them feel your loving presence. We pray for the Schroeder family as they grieve their brother Jerry... for Arlie and Kay, for Jan and Dennis, for Velma and Merlin. We pray for the family of Daton Wedel... for Esther and Meribeth as they remember their brother-in-law. We pray for the family of Darlene Funk McVey who had endeared herself to those who live and work at Bethesda. In just a few short weeks Darlene brought much joy to those around her. We thank you, God, for welcoming these and all who've died before, into your everlasting Love and Light. Comfort and bless all who are grieving.

We pray for those who are struggling with health issues or undergoing treatments. We continue to pray for Steve Banman and for Judy Goertzen. We pray for Judy Unruh and for Lois Janzen, for healing that has happened for them and for continued healing. We pray for continued care and medical attention for Braxton at the CO Children's Hospital and we thank you for safety on this most recent trip there and back again.

O God, as we decorate and shop and prepare to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus, we're aware that at this moment our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters have decided to cancel Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem this year. The war there is making any celebration impossible. As it rages on, consuming the lives of so many, we still pray for your peace, for your justice, for all of your children to have what they need to live gently on this planet. We pray in the name of Jesus, the One who showed us most clearly how to live in your Love. Amen.

Scripture - Jeremiah 33:10-11; 14-18

Message – Pastor Lois Harder

The Righteous Branch and The Covenant

Anyone who has followed the news recently may have heard that the Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem have decided that because of the war there will be no Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem this year. There's just too much destruction and death and sadness to celebrate.

It's not hard to imagine someone going to Bethlehem right now and saying, "This place is a desolate waste, without people or animals." In Jeremiah's time this was in reference to the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem. But Jerusalem and Bethlehem are only a few miles apart and most Palestinian Christians live in the West Bank – in Ramallah, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. A few years ago they numbered about 11,000 – a small percentage of the entire population there, but nevertheless... they are there. And they have canceled the Christmas festivities this year because "it is a desolate waste, without people or animals".

When Jeremiah was prophesying in Judah in the 7th and 6th centuries, BCE, he was witnessing the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. So, like all the other prophets, Jeremiah was trying to offer explanations for WHY the things that happened had happened. The prophets weren't so much predictors of the future as they were explainers of the present and the past. And so they were always preaching judgment from God because of disobedience of the people. They were always preaching repentance from sin with threats and promises of destruction if they didn't. But the prophets were this weird combination of Debbie Downer and Pollyanna. Because, for all their doom and gloom, they were also the ones who NEVER let the people forget God. The prophets were the ones who kept God in front of the people, who kept reminding them of God's enduring love and mercy, who kept bringing them back to the covenant.

The covenant was the agreement between God and the Hebrew people. It had been established way back, early on in their history when God gave them the Ten Commandments as a corrective to "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". The covenant went on then with the idea that the people of God were those who had been called to live in righteousness. In Isaiah 42, God said to the people,

I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
 I have given you as a covenant to the people, (the rest of the world)
 a light to the nations,
⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
 to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
 from the prison those who sit in darkness.
⁸ I am the LORD; that is my name;
 my glory I give to no other,
 nor my praise to idols.

⁹See, the former things have come to pass,
 and new things I now declare;
 before they spring forth,
 I tell you of them.

We see here that God has been trying, from the beginning, to offer the world a way to live in peace and to create a world where steadfast love and faithfulness come together and justice and righteousness kiss each other as we read about in Psalm 85.

All throughout the Hebrew texts God kept trying, through the wisdom writings and the prophets, through the poetry and the music of the Psalter, God was persistent and the message didn't change. And so, through these prophets that we've heard from this fall, God keeps trying to bring the people back to their mission, their assignment, to remind them what it means to be his covenant people. So, even though the prophets always sounded like doomsdayers, their message was actually a vision of the most beautiful, hopeful and redemptive news! God's intentions have always been for people to help, to be co-creators of the kingdom here on earth, as it is in heaven.

Of course, we know that the most full and complete example of God's covenant plan was found in Jesus – the righteous branch that sprang out of the stump of Jesse. All the way through the Gospels as we read about what he taught and how he lived, we can see and hear God's message – coming through more loudly and clearly than ever. Those who follow me and are faithful to me ARE my covenant people. But by that time, the message had been so diluted and disfigured that it was hard for people to identify it – it felt upside down and backwards and counter to what had become “normal”.

So... where are **we** now, in 2023, with being God's covenant people?

I know that for some of us, reading these prophetic texts can get a little old – it can seem like they're just full of bad news and that they're preaching a God of anger and wrath all the time. But then I re-read that message of beauty and hope and redemption. In Jeremiah 33, verses 6-8, just before the section that Brendon read, God is saying, “I am going to bring recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.” It's important to remember that God is saying “*I* will do this. *I* will restore and heal.” God is asking the people to trust in God's care and keeping – not to fight and bully and kill for it. That's an important part of the covenant too.

And I read again how creative the prophets were; they were always coming up with crazy, attention-grabbing ways of getting the message across. I mean, Isaiah walked around naked for 3 years, Ezekiel baked bread using human poo for his fire starter, Hosea married a prostitute and gave their children awful, weird names, and Jeremiah smashed clay pots in front of his

audience as part of one of his speeches. These folks were really passionate about communicating and they were NOT worried about being popular or having friends – they weren't and they didn't. The prophets likely would not have won any elections.

But thanks to the prophets, after all these hundreds of years the message of what it means to be God's covenant people, although it's still not an easy one to hear, it challenges us in real, everyday ways. Every day we get to make decisions about how to steward our resources in ways that bring God's kingdom closer to this earth. Every day we get to decide how to respond to those around us, to create the beloved community. Together, as God's faithful people we can come up with creative, prophetic, attention-grabbing ways of being a light in the darkness.

I'm grateful for the prophets, for their God-loving faithfulness and their crazy ways of showing it. I pray that in this season of Advent waiting, we can open our minds and our hearts to see the many ways that Jesus is entering and is already present in our everyday world. And I pray that we would have the creativity and the courage to follow him and to be his covenant people. Amen.

Benediction –

Go now with this dream of hope foremost in your mind and your imagination. May you be comforted, inspired, led by God's Holy Spirit to reflect the Light of the World into the world. Amen.