

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
The First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2020
Malachi 3:1-7, John 1:35-42
“From Buying Presents to Being Present”
By Rev. Sue Trigger

LESSON FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT **Malachi 3:1-7** (*CEB*)

Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear the path before me; suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight is coming, says the Lord of heavenly forces. 2 Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can withstand his appearance? He is like the refiner’s fire or the cleaner’s soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver. He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. They will belong to the Lord, presenting a righteous offering. 4 The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in ancient days and in former years. 5 I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against the sorcerers, the adulterers, those swearing falsely, against those who cheat the day laborers out of their wages as well as oppress the widow and the orphan, and against those who brush aside the foreigner and do not revere me, says the Lord of heavenly forces. 6 I am the Lord, and I do not change; and you, children of Jacob, have not perished. 7 Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have deviated from my laws and have not kept them. Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord of heavenly forces. But you say, “How should we return?”

GOSPEL LESSON **John 1:35-42** (*Common English Bible*)

35 The next day John was standing again with two of his disciples. 36 When he saw Jesus walking along he said, “Look! The Lamb of God!” 37 The two disciples heard what he said, and they followed Jesus. 38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he asked, “What are you looking for?” They said, “Rabbi (which is translated Teacher), where are you staying?” 39 He replied, “Come and see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.

40 One of the two disciples who heard what John said and followed Jesus was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. 41 He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Christ). 42 He led him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

He gets it. The importance of being present. It’s not just about gifts, but gifts that have meaning, that send the message, “I know you, and I love you.”

The Advent season begins each year with a word from the prophets of the Old Testament. Today we heard from the prophet Malachi who proclaimed that a messenger would prepare the way of the Messiah who is coming to be present with all people. It is a promise at the heart of the Bible. Today’s reading from Malachi has its difficult moments to be sure. “I will be quick to testify against those who do not revere me.” You can hear the sadness and perhaps anger of God who is mourning the separation from rebellious children

who have chased after other gods. The good news of the prophecy is that God is not promising to keep a distance – not even 6 feet apart. Instead, the prophet announces that God is coming to be present among us, to refine and restore his people. God is sending a savior. It’s as if God is saying, “I know you, and I love. I am coming to be present with you.”

Our second reading this from the gospel of John is not one that you would usually hear during Advent. We are used to the readings from Matthew and Luke with John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Today, we are looking at a different account of John the Baptist. Twice in this reading, John refers to Jesus saying, “Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Can you imagine what it must have been like for people to hear these words for the first time? “What? Who is this man? How can he take away our sins?” It would have certainly gotten their attention.

John was pointing to the coming of Christ and the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. When we sit with this reading from John alongside the prophecy of Malachi we hear about a Messiah who is coming among the people in the power of presence. When Jesus invited the two disciples of John to come and see where he was going, it was the invitation to a journey of a lifetime. “I know you, I love you. I am coming to be present with you.”

Being present isn’t simply about geography or proximity. During these months of the pandemic we have learned that in profound ways. In the days *before* the pandemic, it was not uncommon to hear commentary about the dangers of too much technology. We would hear about how it can impact the ability to be relational and can preoccupy our attention. While that can be true, since the pandemic began we’ve been learning about how technology can also bring us together and connect us with others. We have learned that a phone call or an online worship service can bring people together in powerful ways when it is not safe to be together in person.

In the same way, for years we’ve heard about the commercial distractions of Christmas shopping and celebrations that preoccupy our attention during the Advent season. I’m thinking that this year we have the opportunity to learn some new lessons about that, too. As Mitch pointed out last week, putting up Christmas decorations may be a source of comfort and joy in the midst of the chaos we’ve been living with. Perhaps this year, our gift giving can be more about being present for each other as the gentleman in the video described. Instead of shopping for the sake of giving a gift, shopping for the sake of bringing a piece of our heart to another. This year our giving can say, “I know you, I love you. I am present with you in spirit and in love.” Perhaps this year our presence can say, more than ever before, “I am present with you just as God is present with us this Christmas.”

Bonvera is a health and well-being online company that brings products to your door. The pandemic has impacted businesses greatly during this pandemic, and Bonvera wrote about the challenges in an article on their website. ⁱ There was one paragraph that really stood out to me. “People possess presence. People possess courage. People possess fire and tenacity. People possess resilience and strength. We possess joy and sorrow. You’ve probably realized this, but let us just remind you. You have presence, and you have power and influence. You can make an impact, and you can be a force for good. Even when you’re only speaking with someone on the phone, or even when you’re coming through a screen, you have the power to impact someone’s day. One word, one card, one phone call, or one text can mean a lot to someone hurting right now. These digital platforms won’t capture all that you are, but we must still choose to be powerful with our digital presence and serve people well, no matter who they are.” What a great message for the Church.

As we begin this Advent journey, I encourage you to think about how you can be present to others – a word, a card, a phone call, a text, even in your gift giving. How can you give the power of your presence to others? As the name Emmanuel so clearly tells us – God is with us in Jesus the Christ. He is the gift of God, who came to be present with us. This is the very heart of Christmas. As a follower of Christ, how will you be present to others when the world says stay home and stay safe? How will you point the way to the heart of Christmas and show God’s presence in your life? How will you let others know that you are present with them in God’s spirit and in love?
