

Sunday December 8, 2024
Second Sunday of Advent

Meditation: “Peace”

Last week we heard a word of hope, spoken by the prophet Jeremiah to the people of Judah as they were being taken into exile in Babylon. Today’s message comes from one of the minor prophets, Malachi. Malachi was a prophet of the post-exilic period. Now, just to be clear, the prophets of ancient Israel were not clairvoyants who foretold some distant future. The prophets of ancient Israel were more like a cross between an investigative journalist and a political analyst who spoke forth the injustices of their day. The Judahites, the Jews, had returned from their exile in Babylon, and once again settled into the land God had promised to their ancestor Abraham. Not unlike our own time there was a growth of rationalism and skepticism in a righteous God abounded. In the verse leading up to today’s lesson Malachi repeats the question of the Jews, “Where is the God of justice?”

God’s justice is not as we imagine justice. When we think of justice today we usually think of retributive justice. That is, we usually think of justice as demanding retribution, or repayment in some form, usually by way of punishment. When the Jews asked, ‘where is the God of justice?’ that is what they had in mind, ‘where is the God who rewards the just and punishes the evil?’ All around people lived as they pleased, sinned at will, and declared that they were ‘good’ in the sight of God; that God ‘delighted’ in them: those who were righteous, were losers; and that seemed to be true from what they observed around them. The sinners prospered and the righteous were left in the dust.

Malachi declared that God would come like a refining fire to purify the people until they presented offerings of righteousness. Now right off I have to say that righteousness is not, as many churches would proclaim, about sexual morality, it is much more profound than that. Righteousness is the same as justice, specifically God’s justice, which is distributive justice. God’s sense of justice isn’t about repayment or punishment, but about ensuring that all have what they need, not only to survive, but to thrive.

This week I've been wrestling with the whole concept of justice as it relates to the environment, you know, climate justice. I guess it's partly because of the COP29 conference which happened recently in Azerbaijan. When I was in seminary there were classes on what is called ecotheology. We talked about the injustices that humans practice against God's creation. When God created Adam, God put Adam in the garden to till and to keep it; to steward the earth. Our job from the very beginning was to take care of creation and all of its creatures. Instead we plunder the earth, pollute the skies, foul the waters, desecrate the soil, and drive species out of existence.

Whether you think that we are warming the planet or not; whether you think that the warming of this day is part of a larger cycle or not; it's hard to deny that the climate is changing. It's also hard to deny that human activity has changed things. Lebanon used to be covered in lush forest: the cedars of Lebanon. Now it is practically barren and semi-arid. Scientists report that in the past decade the number of catastrophes around the world are increasing, and increasingly they are related to extreme weather events. Flooding is now a major problem in the world. On the news last night there was a report from Fiji about the rise in ocean levels. One man said that when he was young, the ocean was a ten metre walk from the house. Now it is only two to three metres from the house. People are raising their homes on pillars of concrete block, trying to rebuild and enlarge a seawall, and are planting mangrove and fruit trees, all to help mitigate flooding. Our lust for material wealth is driving us to burn fossil fuels at an alarming rate. And we continue to strip the earth of its forests, its lungs. We have moved much of the heavy industry, and its pollution, to China. How is that just to the people who live there? And as sea levels rise it is the nations with shorelines that will suffer. Yes the people of the Pacific island nations like Fiji will suffer first, but don't think that the people of New York city will be unscathed. As we get wealthier, the people in other parts of the world are disproportionately paying the bill. And that's just the people. What about the rest of God's creatures? Habitat loss has driven many species to extinction, or the edge of extinction. With the reduction of sea ice in Canada's arctic the

polar bear is under stress. Habitat loss for animals will either drive them to extinction or will drive them into areas of human habitation. Habitat loss for other human populations will drive them to seek new homes. In other words, the next rounds of refugees and migrants will be due to the outcomes of climate change. The next wars for land and food will be due to habitat loss for humans.

The leaders at the COP29 conference adopted a climate finance commitment to support the Global South to help them adapt to the effects of climate change. The problem is that they could only agree on a fund of 300 billion US dollars, when the estimates are that 1.3 trillion US dollars is what will be needed to address the global climate crisis. The Global North is shortchanging the Global South by about a trillion US dollars. Where is the justice?

And don't even get me started on the affordability crisis. Foodbanks are straining under the demand for food. We are treating the symptoms of the problem and not the problem itself. We are treating what is a justice issue as a charity issue. We need to address the justice part of this instead of trying to fix the problem with charitable donations..... and that is not a reason to stop the charitable giving in the meantime.

The prophets of old promised God's justice **and** they called us to be just in the present. Nothing has changed in thousands of years. There are injustices in our day, just as there were injustices back then. Only now, the injustices we commit are on a scale capable of rendering the planet uninhabitable. If we want to find peace, and I don't mean just the absence of bullets and bombs, if we truly want to find peace, to find our humanity in loving one another, to find our place in God's creation as stewards of the planet, we need to act with justice and righteousness, ensuring that all have what they need to thrive. Malachi said that it is only when we present offerings of righteousness and justice that God will be pleased, for it is only through righteousness and justice that true peace will be created. O God, let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with us.