

**Advent/Christmas texts**  
**Bible Study class**  
**June 11, 2017**

1. Introduction

- a. Think about the things we do in our church from just after Thanksgiving – New Year's: hymns; worship; special services; special events. Which are your favorites? Why? Are there parts you do not look forward to?
- b. Think about all the things around us in our community, nation, or world that "aren't right" or bother you deeply. Make a list of those things.
- c. Consider the following quote; "If you arrive at Christmas exhausted, you have done Advent incorrectly."

2. Read Jeremiah 33:1-16

- a. Jeremiah is the longest book of the Old Testament when measured by the number of words. The purpose of his writing—which extend over the course of several decades (627-587 BC)—is to help the people come to terms with the fact that Babylon had invaded the nation, destroyed the city (including the city wall, king's palace, and temple) and taken many of the leading citizens to exile in Babylon.

But the people suffered on another level. The destruction of Jerusalem called into question their relationship with God. They were operating under the assumption that all would be well with them; they were God's chosen people, and no matter how powerful their enemies were, God would protect them. The people were faced with abject hopelessness and the potential end of their existence as a nation. Would this be the last generation?

- b. Read verses 4-13 again.
  - i. What have the people lost?
  - ii. What are the people been promised?
- c. Verses 14-16 appear in the Lectionary readings for Advent. Why are these verses included? In the midst of so much destruction, what are the people to long for?

3. Read Zephaniah 3:14-20

- a. Zephaniah's primary message is of the coming "Day of the Lord." He is largely a prophet of doom, exhorting the people of all nations to do what is right and reject what is wrong or face dire consequences. This second part ("dire consequences") is the part we like to overlook. Yet reward for repentance remains a possibility.

Some scholars think that Zephaniah's message is early enough that it might have encouraged the righteous king Josiah to make his reforms, noted in 2 Chronicles 34-35, the last high point in Judah's downward trajectory.

But Zephaniah's "doom" is necessary, in part, because he is so focused on what the future holds. His prophecies of doom suggest that all nations, Judah and her enemies, have much to lose. But in the end, they will gain back more than just what they lost. They will gain back renewed relationships with those who were formerly their adversaries! God's dealing with humanity is not a zero-sum gain: someone does not have to lose something for another to gain something.

- b. As you consider 3:14-20, what is promised for the people's future, in spite of all that is wrong around them?

4. Read Micah 5:2-5a

- a. Micah is the earliest of today's texts; he is one of the earliest "writing" prophets. The kings referred to in Micah 1:1 ruled consecutively from 742 to 686 BC. He wrote in the last years of the divided monarchy and the first years of only Judah's existence, after the Northern Kingdom of Israel was essentially annexed by the Assyrian empire. His concern is that the Southern Kingdom of Judah was also in trouble (although they would continue to exist as a nation for another 100 years).

Micah's writings emphasize an important point that people living in that day missed: God had made two covenants with Israel: a *conditional* one with Moses/Israel and an *unconditional* one with David/Jerusalem. People being people, they only wanted to focus on the unconditional one, and forget the other. They incorrectly assumed that God would protect them, no matter what.

- b. What is said of the ruler who is promised to the people?

5. Read Malachi 3:1-4

- a. Malachi is the last of the OT prophets; his writing (based on a few internal clues) is generally dated to the time of Ezra/Nehemiah. In this part of the Bible's history, the people have returned from Babylonian exile to live in Jerusalem. Perhaps because of present struggles—and probably because of the experiences that led them into exile in the first place—there is a bit of hypervigilance about the rightness of their living. At times, their leaders seem overzealous.

Malachi deals with "the details of animal sacrifice, the payment of tithes, bored priests, unfaithful husbands, and complaining laity."

This passage is a bit of a tangle to interpret. It almost reads like it is two different passages that have been mixed together; it bounces between the first person and the third person; it's not always clear whether "the messenger" or "the Lord" is being referred to.

Interestingly, this passage shows up in the lectionary twice, perhaps reflecting this dual interpretation. It is a text for the Second Sunday of Advent, year C, in reference to John the Baptist. His was a message of preparation, urging people to repent and prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord.

It also appears in the lectionary readings for the “Presentation of the Lord” (February 2) in reference to the infant Jesus being presented in the Temple. When Jesus is brought to the Temple as an infant, Simeon says of him “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:34-35).

- b. Who is this messenger? What is his role? How will he be received?