

Delightful

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
December 9, 2018 – 2nd Sunday of Advent
Text: Malachi 3:1-4

“Delightful” is a word it’s easy to associate with Christmas. One of our unspoken hopes for Christmas each year is that it will be delightful, that it will provide happy moments where everything is just as it should be. Everybody likes their Christmas gifts and no one needs the gift receipts you so painstakingly collected because no one wants to return their gift. All the holiday meals come out perfectly, exactly as planned for. No one is grumpy or cranky. There are no arguments at the dinner table because, miraculously, all those topics that folks fight over just never come up. The tree and all the decorations are perfect and not a single light burns out prematurely. Family members agree to come to Christmas Eve services with nary a complaint and there is just enough snow falling to provide that magical Christmas atmosphere without any hazardous driving conditions. Well, we can dream...

We always strive for that perfect, delightful Christmas, don’t we? We convince ourselves, often without even realizing we’re doing it, that a perfect, delightful Christmas is possible – if we just try hard enough, if we just put our all into it. “We’re going to have a delightful Merry Christmas this year if it kills me, dammit.”

Sound familiar? I confess, I've been guilty of the sin of chasing after the perfect Christmas. In years past, I've convinced myself that the perfect Christmas was not only possible, but my sole responsibility to make it happen. For everybody. And let's bear in mind, I'm in the ministry. So, when I'm talking about striving for that perfect Christmas experience, I'm also talking about Christmas Eve worship services.

In my earlier years in ministry, I was known to go overboard on preparing for the early Christmas Eve service I was responsible for as the Family Ministries minister on staff at a large church. I kid you not – one year I spent all afternoon on Christmas Eve setting up the chancel for a life size nativity scene in the church where I was serving, literally walking around the entire sanctuary, including the entire balcony, to make sure the chancel looked exactly like I wanted it to for the service from every viewing angle in the church. I agonized because I convinced myself that if this service wasn't perfect to the smallest detail, Christmas would somehow fail to be Christmas. Yes, I was young to ministry and very enthusiastic. And I was also nuts. The simple truth is no one can make Christmas perfect for someone else. No one can force someone else to find delight in something, no matter how precious that something might be to you. Delight must be genuine to have any meaning at all.

The word “delight” leaped off the page to me when I first read today’s text from Malachi. “The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.” If you found this text confusing when you heard it this morning, you are not alone. It is confusing, even more so as the text chosen to coincide with this second Sunday of Advent where the focus is peace. If we are to understand this text at all and find its connection to peace, we must first explore the circumstances from which it arose. The first thing to know is that Malachi was not a person. “Malachi” actually means “my messenger” or a messenger of God. That fits with other Advent we read which reference a messenger coming to prepare the way of the Lord. In the case of Malachi, the messenger remains anonymous because the message is more vital than the person delivering it.

But why is messenger someone in whom we delight? Well, that’s really the crux of the significance of this text. The messenger is someone sent by God to remind the people of the covenant, the details of the relationship they have with God. In the Hebrew Scriptures that relationship with God is legalistic, based in the Ten Commandments of course, but also in the minutest of details about how worship of God in the Temple is to happen. The book of Leviticus is a compilation of literally hundreds of rules which cover everything from the length of a man’s beard to what can be eaten and what can’t to how you treat

the animals you own and the people who work for you. The messenger of today's text – in whom the people are to take delight – has been sent by God to remind the people about the entire covenant the people have with God, because to God it is obvious they have forgotten most of it.

At the point when Malachi is written, the people have strayed away from the covenant they have with God as God's people. The setting is about 100 years after the people have returned to Jerusalem following the Babylonian captivity. Jerusalem has been rebuilt along with the wall that encloses it. The Temple has been rebuilt and worship under the guidance of the Levitical Priests has been re-established according to the ancient laws, or so it was intended. But the sad truth that the messenger is confronting is that the worship of the Lord has become lax. Even the priests don't care about the sanctity and significance of worship in maintaining the covenant with God. The priests now take shortcuts with the sacrifices and keep the difference in cost savings for themselves. The people have become accustomed to a different way of life under the Persian empire, often ignoring their responsibilities to God in favor of the expectations of the empire.

So, the situation which this messenger confronts is one of God's people, including their religious leaders, having turned their backs on God. God's expectations of them, God's hopes for them no longer matter. The people have put their own needs and

desires before God and the result is a society in which greed and oppression have pushed compassion and justice to the side. Those who have more and more accrue more and more at the expense of those who have less and less. Sound familiar?

That's one of the amazing things about the Bible, and this text is a perfect example – the issues we struggled with every day in our own lives are the very same issues humans have struggled with for millennia! The people are different. The external circumstances are different. But the problem is the same! God's people have turned their backs on God, probably without fully realizing what they've done. Enter the messenger – the prophet – whose job it is to tell the people God knows the situation and God will do something about it. God will “purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.” He's telling these priests who have become so lax in their duties and preoccupied with their own well-being that God demands more of them and God will do what God needs to do to make sure they remember who and whose they are.

Okay, but where is the delight in all this? Where is the peace in all this? Well, I think the delight is the people's delight in God. It is God's messenger who reminds the leaders how they are to conduct themselves in leading the people in a way that brings delight to them. “The messenger ... in whom you delight” is the

one who reminds the people of their relationship with God and what it takes to keep that relationship intact and functioning. The fact is, one's relationship with God – ours today and those ancient people – that relationship, like any relationship, takes work and effort. You have to pay attention to it. You have to nurture it and sustain it every day. It is not automatic. And that's the mistake the leadership and the people themselves had made which caused Malachi to deliver his message. And what was that message? To pay attention because God is coming! To pay attention because letting your focus on God lapse, pushed to the side by the vagaries and demands of life, only sets the stage for life to go off the rails. Malachi is reminding us all that every step away from God is a step towards emptiness. A step away from God's unending delight in us is a step toward becoming part of the darkness in the world instead of the light God needs us to be. This is where peace comes into the conversation. Every step away from God makes peace more distant and less feasible because the further we are from God, the more injustice and oppression have free reign to set in. Those voids in life where God used to be are gobbled up by stuff and nonsense that serve only to push God further and further out of our lives. This makes the all-encompassing peace God wants for us impossible to attain.

In this text from Malachi, I think we find a potent reminder that peace is more than the absence of hostilities between warring

parties. Peace is really that all encompassing sense of happiness, well-being and delight in living life each day. It is finding fulfillment in being who you are, doing what you're doing and knowing that God is somehow part of it all. The very simplicity of peace is why it remains so elusive. Peace comes from deep within your soul, from knowing how much God delights in you just as you are, from delighting in God just as God is. Easy to say, easy to describe, but so very difficult to obtain. Let's face it, life conspires against our desire for peace, for God's presence in our lives, on a daily basis. From the moment the alarm goes off in the morning to the moment you switch off the light at night, life is anything but peaceful. Challenges and stresses come at you nonstop. Some are big and overwhelming, like a health or job crisis for you or someone you love. Most are small and annoying, like the glass that slips out of your hand and shatters on the floor when you're already in a hurry. Peace, like that perfect Christmas, never quite materializes as we desire. Therein lies the conundrum posed by Malachi.

If we delight in God, and God delights in us, why then is peace and contentment so elusive? Well, why wouldn't it be? If God delights in us, deeply flawed though we know we are, why should God's delight in us mean our lives should be carefree and delightful? Simple. It doesn't. God loves us, delights in us, in spite of all the reasons there are not to, and we know there are

plenty. It is those undelightful things about us – the ones God loves us in spite of – these are the things that conspire against the peace we so long for. When God’s hopes for us, God’s expectations of us are short-changed or set aside, no matter how good we think the reason is for doing so, God becomes a little more distant from us. Peace for ourselves, peace for the world, becomes a little more difficult to achieve because without God, peace is just not possible. Humans are not wired for peace, much as we might want to think otherwise.

The good news is that humans are wired to be in relationship with God. God created us as beings in whom God delights. God literally created us to be delightful! All God asks is that we accept the challenge of being who God created us to be, a challenge God puts before us every moment of every day. And, if we are up to this challenge, that’s when peace becomes more than a dream or a distant wish. When we all strive to be the delightful beings God created us to be, peace becomes possible. Peace becomes reality. Peace becomes our way of life. I know, this sounds impossibly simple. But, as we used to say in the 70’s, “all we are saying is give peace a chance.” It could be delightful! Amen.