

First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Dr. Mark Braverman
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Texts: Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 3:1-6, Malachi 3:1-4

I love this place. I want to thank Steve for the precious gift of this pulpit this morning.

Years ago -- it was probably back in 2007 not long after I had begun making my annual pilgrimage to Old Lyme, David Good told me about a conversation he had had with Jerry and Joan Silberberg, a wonderful Jewish couple who had joined the FCCOL community. Joan had been trying to convince Jerry to attend worship services. "I don't believe in organized religion" Jerry said to David. "That's OK," David replied, "we're not very organized!" I tell this story because it relates to the selected texts for today. When David first invited me to preach, I said that I would follow the lectionary. "We're UCC," said David, so you don't have to." "I was raised in the synagogue," I replied -- you follow the assigned texts for the week!" And the lectionary has never let me down. But this time, I mistakenly went to Advent 1 and, looking at Jeremiah chapter 33, the sermon immediately began to take shape for me. It was halfway finished before I noticed my mistake. But I'm going with it, in a nod to UCC unorthodoxy.

But just to say -- it's not true that your church is not organized. You are very organized in your priorities, your direction, your mission. You walk the talk.

I first preached from this pulpit on December 3rd, 2006, the first Sunday of Advent. I had met David Good barely 3 months earlier, on a lecture tour with 3 Palestinian women. David looked at me, he saw me -- everyone here today who knew David has had this experience -- he saw me, and said, you're coming back here, and you're going to preach. David saw the preacher. And so it was that my preaching career began, 18 years ago, here, on Advent.

David looked at me, and, being David, he saw me -- I know that everyone here today who knew David has had this experience -- he saw me, and he saw the preacher, and he told me that I was coming back to Old Lyme, and that I was coming to Old Lyme to preach in his church. And so began my preaching career -- eighteen years ago, First Sunday of Advent, 2006. I returned almost every year, for the Tree of Life Conference, and to preach.

So David, this one's for you.

I've preached in many churches since that time and it began to be true that people, hearing me, a Jewish man, preaching from the pulpit in church on Sunday from the lectionary, would ask me "when did you convert?" I finally came up with the answer: "I wish it had gone differently in the 1st century, so I wouldn't have to be answering that question!" The first century, where a radical Jewish teacher, visionary and grassroots organizer lived -- and died -- to rescue his people from the political, spiritual and psychological peril of living under the tyranny of Empire. His organizing strategy was based on reminding them of, of bringing them back to, the life-giving spring of Torah, meaning a way of life centered on devotion to God's plan for a just world. I wish that that things had gone differently, so that Jesus' vision of one humanity, one body united in love and compassion had not resulting in what has been called "the fateful parting," the Christian-Jewish split that has caused so much suffering over the centuries and that we are still working to heal. Jesus was the best Jew, a radical, grassroots organizer, a prophetic teacher, ready to risk everything to liberate his people from the soul-killing tyranny of Empire. He was the best Jew. He had not intended what has been termed the fateful parting, the splitting off of his followers from the Jewish people, who remained in their insularity and... Christian-Jewish split that has caused so much suffering over the centuries and that we still work to heal.

It is a joyful thing for me to be back here with you today, today -- especially today, because we are in Advent. It being Advent, the readings are all about something new that is coming. But the today's texts are not about the new something that is coming. They are about the need for this urgent need for new thing. Advent is about urgency -- it's an announcement that, like that first Advent, we've reached critical mass. Something's gotta give..

Jesus didn't drop into Roman occupied Palestine by accident. The people of Palestine were hurting. Palestine -- indeed the known world as a whole -- was in the grip of a militarized, expansionist, predatory state. An Empire. The gospel text puts us in the historical picture.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...

So we have the players: the Roman Empire, the local imperial strongmen, the Jewish puppet king, and the elite of the Temple theocracy -- all in the thrall of the Empire. All part of this tyrannous, predatory system. The stage is set for the appearance of the messenger, the interrupter of this human catastrophe.

The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

A question arises. I'm arguing that Jesus came -- or was sent -- because people were hurting -- history was calling for a change. So what is this about forgiveness of sin? Jesus' people, the indigenous farmers, tradespeople, the young, the old, the sick and the healthy of Palestine --the very folks from whom Jesus recruited his followers -- were being bled dry by tribute to Rome, their community-based, agrarian way of life sacrificed to the beast of occupation. So where is the sin? Repentance for what?

Those of you who have heard me preach knows that it often comes with a Greek lesson. But the issue here is not about language per se. The mistranslation here is how the message of the gospels has been twisted into something tragically unrecognizable, how it was betrayed to serve the interests of the powerful.

Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. How have these words been understood by Christians over the centuries? How do *these words* announce the coming of the Prince of Peace?

The word translated here as sin is *hamartia* -- to miss the mark, to fail of doing, fail of one's purpose. The conventional, pious concept of "sin" is about transgression, punishment. It has been used by the powerful to control, to separate people from their own humanity. From "sin" you get "Salvation." You get "Damnation." Where is the human struggle, where is the opening of the eyes? Where is growth, discovery, rebirth? Where is forgiving oneself? Where is the work to do better when you have fallen short?

On to "forgiveness." The word translated as "forgiveness" is a very different word in the original. You to see the distortion, the wrenching into something else entirely, a whole different system in what has come down to us compliments of the church. The word is *aphesis* -- being released, letting go, being discharged from a debt or bond. Release from what, liberation from what?

But this is the one that really gets to me. The word rendered as "repentance" is *metanoia* -- it means, literally, to change your mind, your perspective, the way you see the world and yourself in the world.

Repent? It wasn't the people who were in sin. It was the society that was sick, sunk deep in complicity with Empire.

The words delivered to us in the translation are all about top down, externalizing, removing power from its source, which is the human spirit -- to control and domination. Something out there has the power. Nothing is left to the self, and, just as important, to the community.

Let's look at the better-known version of John's announcement of Jesus' coming, in Mark chapter 1:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;[e] repent and believe in the gospel.

There is metanoia again, again mistranslated as "repent." And what is it that requires this change of mind? We have this curious phrase, "the time is fulfilled." But Greek has two words for time -- Kronos and Kairos. Kronos is how we think of time -- it's linear -- past present and future, immutable, out of our control and agency, exterior to and unconnected to ourselves.

But the word here is Kairos -- sometimes translated as the "opportune" time. It's a different kind of time. It's an event that changes everything. Theologically, it is God breaking in, an interruption in linear time and causality. This is something that upsets, disrupts, interrupts our expectation and pursuit of predictability, security, safety, comfort.

The South Africans put it well in their 1985 "Challenge to the Church, A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa." "This is the kairos, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action." They were challenging the church -- not the apartheid government, mind you, but the church -- to call for the downfall of the evil regime. Jesus didn't stand in front of the Roman palace on that Palm Sunday, he went straight to the Temple -- the church of his time! -- and said, bring this down!

So we are talking about transformation -- radical change. The change that is required when we encounter injustice -- legalized, structural inequality and cruelty, the violation of the most fundamental principles of humanity. We are in kairos time when the confrontation with this reality is so apparent that we are not allowed to turn away. When, to quote American pastor and theologian Robert McAfee Brown, "God offers a new set of possibilities and we have to accept or decline." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who issued his own challenge to the church of his time, declared that for this confession, this commitment to action, there is only a yes or a no. There is no middle ground.

We are in kairos times. The advent readings take us to these times, our times.

Our next text, from the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, takes us back 6 centuries before Jesus to a time of catastrophe -- a time, like that of Jesus, of imminent, total destruction by Empire.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

The Lord is our righteousness.

Here is another issue of translation. The word here rendered “righteousness” is, quite simply, “justice.” Tzedek. This word appears 400 times in the Old Testament. To use “righteousness” perhaps made more sense in English, but this is not English, it is biblical prophecy. It’s a biblical trope, naming things in this way. “God is our justice” Is a curious name for the land, isn’t it? In these cases I like to look at the text in which the text appears. Here it is, in this prophetic outpouring:

So saith the Lord: There shall again be heard in this place, in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate without an inhabitant and without a beast, the sound of mirth and the sound of joy, the voice of a bridegroom and the voice of a bride, bringing a thanksgiving offering to the House of the Lord, for I will restore the captivity of the land as it was before, saith the Lord.

This is deep prophecy. And it’s quite beautiful. And this image of bringing the land back from its captivity is powerful, but it is puzzling. The land has been exiled?

We go on.

In the cities of the mountain, in the cities of the lowland, and in the cities of the Negev and in the land of Benjamin and in the environs of Jerusalem and in the cities of Judah, here shall again be in this place a dwelling of shepherds resting [their] flocks.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days, Judah shall be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell securely and the name that He shall call it is the Lord is our righteousness.

For so saith the Lord: There shall not be cut off from David a man sitting on the throne of the house of Israel. And of the Levitic priests, there shall not be cut off from before Me a man offering up a burnt offering, or burning a meal-offering or performing a sacrifice for all time.

You can feel the writer’s intense connection with place. Love like this need not be possessive or territorial. Love like this is not possession when it is grounded in community life, in compassion for the living things in it, in the wonder of and respect for creation itself. But here in Jeremiah it is embedded in the context of a covenant, in a special relationship between God and one people. Territory is sanctified. It has a terrible beauty -- I feel it. I feel, as a Jew, the identification of the land with the people. But it is tribal. Here, in this prophetic outpouring, it is in the framework of king and dynasty, can you hear it? And of cultic worship, did you hear that? This soaring vision of reconciliation, of restoration, is situated firmly in the paradigm of one city, one holy mountain, bringing tribute to the house built for God on this one spot. God’s house.

In this paradigm, people and land are indivisible. This explains the “captivity of the land.” With the exile of the people, the land itself suffered, was emptied in some way. Only with the promised return of the people will the land be restored to its purpose and its meaning. Jeremiah never departed from the paradigm of identifying a land with a people. For Jeremiah, as for Ezekiel and other Old Testament prophets, return from captivity meant to rebuild the Temple and to restore Jewish hegemony -- king, army, Temple cult. To return, as the prophecy here reads, to the way things were. You can say that the Hebrew prophets were on the way to a vision of universal justice, but they didn’t get there. They were trapped in the territorial paradigm.

Six hundred years later, Jesus takes this on. In the days between Easter and Pentecost the apostles ask the resurrected Jesus, is it the time Lord, when you restore the Kingdom to Israel? They were talking about Temple, king, walls, armies After 3 years, they still didn’t get it.. Jesus had been answering the question for 3 years.

In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, she says to Jesus, why are you talking to me? You are not even supposed to relate to me -- I'm the other, the outsider, one of "them." You worship on that mountain, we worship on this mountain! And Jesus says to her, woman the day will come when people will not worship on this mountain or on that mountain, but in the spirit.

To test Jesus, an "expert" in the Jewish law asked him, "What is the secret of eternal life?" Jesus answered, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The expert asks: "Who is my neighbor?" And Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan. A naked, beaten man is lying by the side of the road. A priest walks by and keeps going -- in fact he crosses to the other side. A Levite passes by and keeps going. And then a Samaritan — here's that Samaritan again! — stops, lifts him out of the ditch, gets him to safety, feeds him, clothes him. "Which of these three, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" asks Jesus. He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

And then, in that final week in Jerusalem -- Jesus standing in the Temple courtyard, the heart of the beast of Empire, the Temple of gold and stone, the physical embodiment of greed and tyranny, turned into a religious shrine. And saying: Destroy this Temple. Not one stone left upon another.

For Jesus, dynasty becomes Kingdom of God. Temple becomes my body, one humanity, united in compassion and love. Most beloved, special, chosen people becomes Kingdom of God. Leave Jerusalem! Jesus instructs them on Pentecost, go out into the wide world and be disciples to all nations. On Pentecost, the land promise is nullified. The real estate clause of the covenant with Abraham is cancelled. The commandment to drive out the indigenous of the promised land -- gone.

On that last week in Jerusalem, Jesus doesn't turn up at the Roman palace. He knew that the Empire would destroy itself. I heard this repeatedly from the Palestinians. How do you go on, I would ask them, and the answer, from the Christians that I asked, was always the same: Empires come and empires go, they told me. We follow Jesus. We are here. The Muslim Palestinians demonstrate the same faithful resistance, the same resolute commitment to the preservation of their culture, their very presence in their homeland. We heard this today from our friend Mazin (gesturing to Mazin Qumsiyeh seated behind him). He heads straight for the Temple. Take it down, he said, the Jewish theocracy, the elitist system, complicit with Empire in the occupation of their own people, in the captivity of their land.

Jesus took on the Empire in our hearts.

This is what resistance is about. It is what the Palestinians in their 2009 Kairos document call the universal mission of the land.

We believe that our land has a universal mission. In this universality, the meaning of the promises, of the land, of the election, of the people of God open up to include all of humanity, starting from all the peoples of this land.

This is not only the Palestinian story. Nemonte Nenquimo is an indigenous Ecuadoran woman who has devoted her life to resisting the destruction of the rain forest by fossil fuel extraction. A process destroying not only the lungs of the planet but of the way of life of her people, a way of life rooted in the land. She says:

This is a story of resilience, of resistance, of all the Indigenous peoples who are living a great, gigantic threat, because this system reaches our territory day after day after day. The companies continue to invest in what exterminates our territory, our knowledge, our culture. We have to reeducate ourselves, not

to consume what destroys our health, and to reconnect with Mother Nature, to reconnect spiritually and to heal ourselves.

This is our kairos today, this is the reckoning brought home to us from the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, from the theft of its land, from the decades-long incremental and now wholesale genocide of the Palestinian people, the theft of live-giving water, the ruination of their fields, the uprooting of their precious olive groves. It is brought home to us because this is our story. Not only because it is the doing of our government, but in the warning it issues to us about the ideology and the worldview that infects our own society. It's our own settler colonial DNA, isn't it. It's the tension between "All men are created equal," and white supremacy, Christian nationalism, and its handmaiden, Christian Zionism.

Modern day Christian theologians, besotted with the story of the return of the Jews to our Biblical homeland, are beginning to have their eyes opened. In 2002 scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote: "Israel is a people on the way because of a promise, and the substance of all its promises from Yahweh is to be in the land." Then -- and this is the greatness of the man -- he got turned around. Not that many years later this is what he wrote:

The ideology of land entitlement serves the contemporary state of Israel. It is an ideology that is enacted in unrestrained violence against the Palestinian population. It is clear that the same ideology of entitlement has served derivatively the Western powers that are grounded in that same ideological claim and that have used that claim as a rationale for colonization.

This is what colonialism does. It steals. It extracts, it dominates, it destroys -- people --and land.

This is our kairos.

In our third text, the Hebrew prophet Malachi gives us fire. Fire that destroys, but also transforms.

Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire. He will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness!

This is radical stuff. It goes to the elite of the Temple cult. The prophets knew it was a problem. They knew it had to be transformed. But we had to wait for Jesus to stand in front of the Temple and say "bring this down!"

Malachi's prophecy is the counterpoint to the familiar, comfortable and comforting Christmas images of the tender infant in the manger, the gentle animals looking on, the wise men bringing gifts. *Who can endure the day of his coming?* This is not how we do Christmas! But these are the texts! Watch out -- we will be challenged!

Last week at the annual meeting of Kairos Palestine I heard the words of Latin Patriarch Emeritus of the Holy Land Father Michel Sabbah, the principle author of the Palestine Kairos document, 95 years old, a spiritual beacon for his people, for all humankind. He offered these words to his people --to us all, in the midst of this darkness:

Be more Christian. Faith is the core of resistance. God is stronger than man. So we must educate ourselves, to be more with God. The final word will be God's word, not man's word. Not Netanyahu's, not Biden's.

It ain't easy. Fr. Daniel Berrigan wrote: "If you are going to follow Jesus, you better look good on wood."

But there is good news! It's about community, about finding the true source of strength, of persistence. What the Palestinians call *Sumud*. Being firmly planted.

For we Jews, it is climbing out of the spiritual, psychological, soul-killing hole we have dug for ourselves in our ethnic nationalist project. Why, a Palestinian youngster in east Jerusalem once asked me, do they make the Jews live behind that wall?

I think of those boys, those men -- and women -- dropping the bombs on Gaza, sending videos of their gleeful, laughing faces in front of the hospitals, schools and apartment blocks they have turned into rubble. I am in deep grief for them. It's not a new story, 5 million of the 6 million Jews murdered in Europe were killed not in the death factory of Auschwitz but in town squares, burning synagogues and death pits on the outskirts of hundreds and hundreds of cities and villages in Poland, Russia, Lithuania and Ukraine by ordinary people, recruited into killing squads by the Nazi regime. These people, occupied, dispossessed, betrayed by their own leaders, struggling to survive, were told that the Jews, those *others*, those sub-humans, had to die so that *they* could live. It's not the same today-- most Israelis live in relative comfort. But they carry the intergenerational trauma of almost 2000 years of suffering. They have been raised on fear, on the psychology of victimhood. It has damaged them. It has separated them from their humanity. They do not see a neighbor. They see an enemy -- to be feared, blamed, and destroyed.

This is not a new story. It's a warning for us here today in the United States. This is the question we are facing today in our nation. Are we looking out for one another, especially for those who are struggling, who can't make ends meet on two jobs, on whose backs this country was built? Or are we feeding the insatiable appetite for power and wealth of the 1%?

Who is my neighbor?

When did I convert? When did I repent, change my mind, get turned around? Growing up as a Jew in mid 20th century America, privileged, untouched by antisemitism, I was nevertheless taught that the world outside my Jewish bubble was dangerous. When, like Jacob of the Bible, I went to the Holy Land to meet my purported enemy, when I met my brother whom I had wronged, my fear was transformed by his love. Looking into his eyes, as the biblical story of Jacob's encounter with Esau reads, I saw the face of God. I stepped, in Bonhoeffer's words, into the true church, the church, in Bonhoeffer's words, from below. Peopled, in the words of African American theologian Howard Thurman, by those with their backs against the wall.

This is the church that breaks in to change in human affairs. This is the church that, thanks to the monastics and to the courageous dissidents throughout church history, preserved the true church as it threw itself headlong into its alliance with Empire, wielding the bloody swords of the Crusades, carrying out the Papal edict to dispossess the subhuman brutes of Africa and the Americas, enrobing the priests who were there on the docks of Lisbon to bless the first ships loaded with their human cargo from West Africa.

This is the church that must demand of our elected officials today that they fulfill their oath to defend the Constitution, and even more important, to the fundamental values of humanity our nation claims to be founded on. This is the church which is, in the words of South African theologian John De Gruchy, "the community within which God manifests in history."

The final word will be God's word, says Patriarch Sabbah, not man's word. Not Netanyahu's, not Biden's.

Who is the righteous branch? We are the righteous branch. We are God's justice. God, not thundering from the mountain, not vanquishing our enemies, but in the still small voice invoked in the Jewish liturgy of atonement, in the quiet contemplation of the monastery, in the everyday acts of kindness transforming the stranger, the leper, the beggar, the naked man in the ditch, the demonized other called "terrorist" or "alien" or "migrant" or "undocumented," into our neighbors, clasping them to us and seeing in them the face of God.

Let us pray.

Lord of Creation, Lord of the Cross, Lord of the street and the border crossing and the rubble and of resistance and hope. Ground us, firmly, persistently, stubbornly in the soil of justice. Your justice. Our justice. Plant us in the land of mercy and compassion and life giving sustenance and the spirit and of hope.

AMEN