

10.01.23 – Pentecost 18

“Divine Presence”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Jeremiah 29:10-14 (The Message)

¹⁰⁻¹¹ This is God’s Word on the subject: “As soon as Babylon’s seventy years are up and not a day before, I’ll show up and take care of you as I promised and bring you back home. I know what I’m doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for.

¹² “When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I’ll listen.

¹³⁻¹⁴ “When you come looking for me, you’ll find me.

“Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed.” God’s Decree.

“I’ll turn things around for you. I’ll bring you back from all the countries into which I drove you”—God’s Decree—“bring you home to the place from which I sent you off into exile. You can count on it.

Leader: This is an Assuring Prophecy from God! All: Thanks be to God!

2 Peter 1:12-21 (The Message)

The One Light in a Dark Time

¹²⁻¹⁵ Because the stakes are so high, even though you’re up-to-date on all this truth and practice it inside and out, I’m not going to let up for a minute in calling you to attention before it. This is the post to which I’ve been assigned—keeping you alert with frequent reminders—and I’m sticking to it as long as I live. I know that I’m to die soon; the Master has made that quite clear to me. And so I am especially eager that you have all this down in black and white so that after I die, you’ll have it for ready reference.

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ We weren’t, you know, just wishing on a star when we laid the facts out before you regarding the powerful return of our Master, Jesus Christ. We were there for the preview! We saw it with our own eyes: Jesus resplendent with light from God the Father as the voice of Majestic Glory spoke: “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of all my delight.” We were there on the holy mountain with him. We heard the voice out of heaven with our very own ears.

¹⁹⁻²¹ We couldn’t be more sure of what we saw and heard—God’s glory, God’s voice. The prophetic Word was confirmed to us. You’ll do well to keep focusing on it. It’s the one light you have in a dark time as you wait for daybreak and the rising of the Morning Star in your hearts. The main thing to keep in mind here is that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of private opinion. And why? Because it’s not something concocted in the human heart. Prophecy resulted when the Holy Spirit prompted men and women to speak God’s Word.

Leader: These Words Come from God’s Authority. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, we thank you for the many opportunities this week to be together in fellowship and service, and today to worship you and hear a message from you. We know that we need creativity and encouragement to minister to others and to share our prayers and praises. We ask for your insights this morning as we hear both prophecy and instruction to continue your Kingdom work here on earth. Fill us with your presence as we recommit our love and attention and hear your Words and your voice as you speak through mine. Amen.

What a fun week we've had together! Thank you to our new Mailbox Angels who came for our pop-up activity on Thursday. We sent out 35 caring cards in less than two hours as an outreach and discipleship activity. There will be another one in late November or early December to prepare Christmas cards! Will let you know as soon as I can schedule it.

Last Sunday as we studied Chapter 31, we learned about the prophet Jeremiah and God's promise to restore the Babylonian exiles back to Judah. Today, we get the back story. You may recall that Jerusalem was conquered in 598, and Solomon's temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar by 587. The more prominent Jews were exiled to Babylon in several deportations and their money was stolen or redistributed. As they witnessed the vast differences in cultures and felt abandoned by Yahweh, they began to despair and wanted to go back home. Chapter 29 is Jeremiah's first letter of prophecy and encouragement to the exiles, written between 598 and 587 BC probably from Egypt where he had fled. On behalf of Yahweh, he told them to build houses, plant gardens, marry, and settle down among the Babylonian people because restoration to Judah would come only after seventy (70) years of God's judgment.

In today's passage, Jeremiah reminds the people of God's love and promise to them; much like he saved the Israelites from Pharaoh in the wilderness, he would take care of them in this current territory. They

could rest and live in God’s hope knowing that he had a future plan for them. For us, this is a popular passage for graduations, ordinations, or any times of difficulty. “¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (Jer. 29:11 ^{NIV}).” For us as a church, it reminds us that no matter how small we have become, God’s plan for us is ministry. Our vision has not changed: *“We seek to develop an intentional relationship with God as in Jesus so that our lives demonstrate the transforming effect and supreme importance of such a relationship for us, our society, and our world.”* Doesn’t that vision statement mean the same thing as our passage – to participate in God’s divine presence and plans for good and for a future of ourselves, our society, and our world? That IS ministry.

How do we carry on this vision? By remembering Jeremiah’s prophecy for ourselves too. We live in a similar mixed society where pagan worship is more popular than Christian worship. Jeremiah reminds us to seek God regularly and not try to do it all in our own power: ¹² “When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I’ll listen. ¹³⁻¹⁴ When you come looking for me, you’ll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed (Jer. 29:12-14 ^{The Message}).” Those words in today’s language remind me to seek his Divine Presence at all times, but especially as it relates to this church. After twenty years of consolidation, we have become The United Baptist Church; but are we like the restless exiles? Or have we put our focus and attention on that Vision to build (or re-build), to plant fertile ground, and to pray for God’s power and presence to permeate every move we make to help him transform us, this community, and our world? “I’ll turn things

around for you. I'll bring you back from all the countries into which I drove you.” God’s promise was fulfilled for the Jews and for us through Jesus and will be again when Christ returns.

This takes us to our second passage as we move from First Peter to Second Peter. Although there are some style differences, scholars agree, because of similar word choices throughout, that both epistles (letters) were written by the apostle Peter, known as the disciple Simon Peter, one of Jesus’ closest friends and students, probably while he was in Rome. This second letter responded to the popular false apostles and teachers in society at this time (approximately 64-68 AD). Peter’s goal was to encourage early Christians not to be misled by evil teachers with no credentials, but rather to hope in Christ for their secure salvation and his certain return.

In the verses before today’s passage, especially verses 3-4, he reassures his hearers and readers that through Christ, we also have God’s “Divine Power” and “Divine Nature” that give a believer all they need for living a Godly life. Further verses instruct the believers on the how:

⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.

Peter writes these words with a sense of urgency since he knows that he will die very soon. We know that he was crucified in Rome not much later than these letters were sent. He wanted to help mature Christians, being called to salvation and to live a Godly life, remember the “Divine Promise” in the return of Christ, so they could be strong examples to

others and have hope during their exile. Verses 12-21 focus more on the Word of God being the key to spiritual maturity. God's holy presence can be found in the Word by studying his majesty and power there. Peter recounts the transfiguration as a demonstration of God's glory and presence through the luminosity of Christ on Mount Tabor: "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light (Matthew 17:2b ^{NIV})."

During this miraculous illumination, the disciples of Peter, James, and John heard and witnessed God's glory and divine presence. In hindsight, Peter realized that that experience was a profound *Kairos* moment that would not only fill his writing with **authority** but would also be proof that Christ would surely come again to fulfill God's "Divine Promise".

Last week we learned the importance of confidence and humility to do Kingdom work. This week, both passages convey God's hope and love for the people, including us. We need encouragement occasionally, don't we? The prophet, Jeremiah, and apostle, Peter, help us to see how God participates with his created beings (us) every day if we just pay attention and seek his presence. Our Quarterly reading of the Church Covenant and our monthly observance of the Lord's Supper invite us too to experience God's Divine Presence through the elements, prayer, and the church memberships' spiritual gifts. As you listen to the words of communion, seek him so you will be found. We ask Christ to be figuratively present in the elements of bread and juice, as we feel the divine presence of the Holy Spirit. Let this be a reminder of our Vision and calling to this church, our society, and the world. Amen? Amen. //

Please pray with me. Divine Presence, we do seek you. We seek you in every breath and every word. Help us to be living examples of

your divine power and glory, even though we are so flawed. Help us to be more aware of you through Scripture, prayer, and this Lord's Supper. We thank you for the promises of divine community in your presence and ask that you help us to share that with others. In your luminous and precious Son Jesus' name, we pray, **Amen.**