

In this morning's text from Malachi we overhear a conversation between God and the Israelites. These people have been through a lot... after living in exile under the Babylonians for almost 50 years, the Israelites have finally been allowed to return to their homeland but are now living under the Persians, yet another foreign power. They have worked to rebuild their destroyed temple and are trying desperately to figure out what it means to live faithfully in this latest chapter of their journey with God.

Some of them, perhaps all of them, have found much to complain about, and are doing so with regularity. They are taking God to task, so to speak, for allowing the arrogant to be happy and evildoers to prosper in spite of the fact that they do not keep God's commands or serve God.

The problem is not their reaction to this situation, for their anger is understandable. God has promised that those who do evil will stand in judgment rather than prosper, that the arrogant will not have cause to boast and just the opposite is happening. The problem is that these Israelites haven't been speaking directly to God but rather grumbling among themselves about God and have decided to stop trying to be faithful since it looks like it doesn't matter whether they are or not.

It's sort of like the meeting-after-the-meeting... you know the kind: whether it's in the parking lot of your office, child's school or the church, we've all seen it... we've probably all done it... something happens in an official meeting that rubs us the wrong way and instead of bringing it up then and there, we take it outside and find a group who thinks the way we do and grumble to them. "Can you believe what Bob suggested we do with the money we raised at that last fundraiser? And can you believe that people actually went along with it? I'm just shocked and appalled. I guess it doesn't matter what we say or do- Bob's gonna get his agenda passed in spite of what some of us want." A sense of cynicism begins to grow among the group gathered and they leave that meeting-after-the-meeting not sure about why they even showed up in the first place. They take that grumbling to some other friends and the cynicism starts to spread within the larger group until it turns into full-blown despair.

This is the situation that this passage from Malachi illuminates- God finds the Israelites in full blown despair and recognizes the seriousness of the matter- despair is not something to mess around with. It is a killer of hope, a destroyer of faith and so God reaches out to the people.

"I have not forgotten you", God says. "I know it might look like it but I am still the Lord who created you, who called you mine, who seeks to dwell with you always. This is who I am." God says, "and you have forgotten that. You have forgotten who I am and you have forgotten who you are. You have ceased telling the story of your being called, released, made whole... you have created a new story that is not based on what your ancestors have handed down about how I have

moved in your lives in the past but rather what you see in front of you- it is an unexamined story, and an untrue one... I made the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, I took you from slavery in Egypt, I led you through the desert into the promised land flowing with milk and honey... I gave you back your land and your temple... I am the one who did all these things for you and I will keep doing these things... I am a God of redemption and release and that is the story you have got to start living by again...

According to the text, this gets the people's attention, and they make a decision to live into that which has always been true about God but not always remembered by them. They decide to have hope that what they see happening all around them is not the whole story, nor the final one. They trust that when God promises them a sun of righteousness with healing in its wings they can count on that coming to fruition.

Their story is our story, and it is one that we must live by today. It holds the key to fighting off the despair rampant in our world, for in so many ways we are like these early Israelites wandering hopelessly in a strange land. In an age where wars rage endlessly between neighboring countries... where sick children don't qualify for medical insurance, where teenagers panhandle next to upscale clothing stores... In an age where churches sue dioceses over property, where congregants are no longer willing to take communion with those they have sat with for years, where ecclesiastical authorities hold secret meetings with only those who agree with them... it is obvious that we have forgotten who God is and who we are and have allowed despair to take over. We have allowed ourselves to live by a narrative that does not point to the God who always always always brings life out of death. And we must stop living by that other narrative and claim for ourselves the one that says we have reason to hope because in spite of what looks like evidence to the contrary we too have a sun of righteousness that has risen and will continue to rise with healing in its wings.

We do this every time that we come to this sanctuary and find ourselves in the stories of God's redemptive work from the prophets, from the psalmist, from the letters to the early churches, from the gospel accounts. We do this every time we gather around the table and receive the risen body and blood of Christ together. We do this when we give food, time and money to Casa Marianella, to SafePlace, to Kairos. These are all, in the words of a wise friend of mine, acts of Christian hope that serve to drive away the darkness of cynicism and pull us close to the light of God. And they allow us to emerge from this place transformed and ready to take that story to those who can't or won't join us here.

We live in a fallen world, so even when we practice these Christian disciplines faithfully, there will still be days when cynicism and despair seem to get the best of us. But the beauty of Christian community is this: on the days when your cynicism gets so high that you can't pray the prayers, I will pray them for you. On the days when my despair prevents me from singing the hymns, you can sing

for me. We are in this together, so when one of us can't do something that someone else can, it is like we have all done it.

This truth is one of the most powerful ones I know of for fighting the despair that seeks to destroy all of us. So if we believe this truth, let us live it in such a way that it pours out of us into this frightened and hurting world soaking it with hope.