

“Draw Near”

Philippians 4:4-9 & 2 Kings 22:1-11

The Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan

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2 Kings 22:1-11

Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; he reigned for thirty-one years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath. ²He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left. ³In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the Lord, saying, ⁴Go up to the high priest Hilkiah, and have him count the entire sum of the money that has been brought into the house of the Lord, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people; ⁵let it be given into the hand of the workers who have the oversight of the house of the Lord; let them give it to the workers who are at the house of the Lord, repairing the house, ⁶that is, to the carpenters, to the builders, to the masons; and let them use it to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house. ⁷But no account shall be asked from them for the money that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly.' ⁸The high priest Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, 'I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.' When Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it. ⁹Then Shaphan the secretary came to the king, and reported to the king, 'Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workers who have oversight of the house of the Lord.' ¹⁰Shaphan the secretary informed the king, 'The priest Hilkiah has given me a book.' Shaphan then read it aloud to the king. ¹¹When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Two weeks ago, I popped downstairs during It's Elementary. I needed to speak to my children and remind them that they weren't riding home with me that day. I stood outside of one of the second-grade classrooms for a few minutes before getting Teddy's attention. The children were all on the rug, listening to a story while one of the teachers read to them from a rocking chair. I realized that it was the

Christmas story. The notion I got, in that moment, was of the faithful, drawing near, to hear a familiar story. It was such a warm, inviting, and important image.

On any given afternoon, at the corner of W. Faris and S. Pleasantburg, directly across from the Pita House and beside Greenville Tech, you are likely to encounter my friend. I call him my friend, but I don't know his name, his age, or any details about him. I do know that he has the best, most genuine smile, and a hearty wave for anyone who glances in his direction while waiting at the stoplight. He also holds a cardboard sign. It isn't a fancy cardboard sign. It is rather small and looks like it was cut from a discarded box. It features decent handwriting in black marker. But rather than what you might typically expect of someone standing at a stoplight, holding a cardboard sign, he is not asking for anything. Instead, he is offering something. "God loves you," it says. My friend stands in that location many an afternoon just holding that sign, smiling and waving to anyone who looks his way.

The first time I noticed him, it was out of the corner of my eye, and I tried not to look over. I can't remember if I had my children in the car with me, but I do know I was hesitant to look over. Because I thought I knew what his sign said. I thought I knew something about him. I thought I knew what he was looking for. But I didn't. I don't recall if I glanced his way that day or some day shortly after, but when I did let myself look over, I was pleasantly surprised. Instead of someone with their hand out, asking for money or food, I saw a smile. A genuine smile. And when I waved, he waved back. And when I took the time to read his sign, I realized it was offering me something. A blessing. A reminder. A call to draw near to God, to my faith, to my neighbors. Since the first time I noticed my friend and really saw him, I find myself looking for him every day on my way home. I'm eager to read his message and see his smile and to offer a smile and wave in return. Most days, I need his reminder to draw near.

King Josiah of Judah reigned from 640-609 BCE. He became king at the age of 8 and he died just before reaching 40. He rose to the throne 322 years after the great King David. King David was considered great not because of his looks or power or wealth, but because of a heart that drew near to God. And we need to remember that while David ruled a united kingdom of Judah and Israel, Josiah just ruled Judah. The kingdoms had split back in 920 BCE and the capital of Jerusalem stayed in the southern kingdom of Judah. And between the two kingdoms in those years, no one really lived up to being the type of king God wanted. You had some who did okay

over the years and some who did horribly. One scholar puts it this way, “Up to this point in Kings, the history that the narrator presents is a history of failure. From Solomon on down, the kings have failed to live up to the high standards of faithfulness the Torah demands.”

The northern kingdom of Israel had been captured by the Assyrians when Josiah’s great-great grandfather ruled the southern kingdom of Judah. By the time Josiah came into power things were a mess. The greatness of David was a distant memory. The temple was in ruins. The leadership was corrupt. The people weren’t taking their faith in God seriously. When Josiah was 26 years old, he decided to embark upon a project of repair for the temple that was in ruins. Via his secretary, he gave money to the high priest Hilkiah who was to use it to pay the workers and buy materials. While Hilkiah and his workers were completing their repairs, they stumbled upon something no one expected to find – *the Book of the Law*.

Have you ever watched those house renovation shows when some couple finds something crazy exciting while renovating? Maybe it is a pile of money, hidden behind a wall. Or a long-lost love letter tucked in the corner of a closet. Or a beloved recipe stuck to the back of a kitchen drawer. Well, this was like that, but better. Because it was the word of God. *The Book of the Law* was what God had given Moses and the people as an instruction manual on how to live. The very moment Josiah was informed of this find, he knew it was important. That’s why Josiah tore his clothes. People in that day and age tore their clothes to represent something holy. To represent their short-comings. To mourn the ways they had failed to live up to God’s standards. And this *Book of the Law* convicted Josiah of all those things. As a leader, Josiah recognized its importance. He heard its clear call to help his people draw near to God again. Most scholars agree that this *Book of the Law* that was found was some form of Deuteronomy, the book where we find an account of the 10 commandments and so much other guidance for living a life of faith. British Old Testament scholar John Goldingay points out, “We don’t know whether it had been gathering dust in a corner of the temple for a year or a decade or a century, but this is when it comes to life.” Whatever this backstory, Josiah did something with it. Just a chapter later we learn that Josiah had this book read to the people and together they all renewed a covenant with God.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, so we have a story before us a story about a king from the Old Testament who “did what was right in the sight of the Lord.” It’s

also the last Sunday of the church year. Did y'all know that? A new year in the liturgical realm starts next week with the first Sunday of Advent. It is when we begin to anticipate the birth of a king who's entire being is radically different from any earthly king we've ever known. We prepare our homes and our hearts for his arrival. We buy gifts and host parties to celebrate his coming. We draw near to hear that story that never gets old once again. The story of the night our faith came alive. So, even though it is not December 31, today we find ourselves looking forward and looking back. What lessons did we learn last year? How can we prepare to engage with God in new ways in the coming year?

You may have noticed that I have landed upon a certain phrase from our passage from Philippians today. Any phrase from this passage could be a good one to take into Advent with you. Scott and Susan Clark, who wrote this week's Harbinger article, landed on "let your gentleness be known to all". You might connect with, "Rejoice in the Lord always," or "do not worry about anything," or "think on these things". I've landed on "DRAW NEAR". Partly because that's what I see in Josiah's story. Partly because that's what my friend at the corner of Faris and Pleasantburg reminds me to do. Partly because the growing darkness of this season beckons me to do so. Draw near to God and neighbor. Draw near to hear the story once again. Draw near in order to find strength for daily living. Draw near to have God surprise with new revelations.

Because of the phrase I've landed upon, the hymn "Nearer My God to Thee" is one I have not been able to get off my mind this week. I looked up its back story with some help from Marlon and I would like to share it with you. This hymn is considered to be the finest hymn written by a female hymnwriter. Sarah Flower Adams was an English woman who lived in the early nineteenth century. She and her sister, Eliza, were known for many of their hymns, most of which were songs of praise to God. Sarah would write the lyrics and Eliza, the music. Sarah wrote this particular hymn for a sermon her pastor was preparing to preach about Jacob's dream while on the run from Esau. Unlike her many hymns of praise, this is more of a prayer or testimony. A call to her brothers and sisters in the faith to draw near to God, whatever the circumstances.

You're probably familiar with its tune, or at least some of its stanzas because of its role in popular culture. It was the favorite hymn of 25th U.S. President William McKinley. He recited it on his deathbed and the congregation sang it at his funeral. It

is said to have been played by the band on board as the Titanic sank in 1912. The 1998 blockbuster hit has a whole scene featuring it. I rewatched it a few days ago and it is actually a rather lovely scene, even if it is quite fictionalized.

The band begins to go their separate ways once they realize that the unsinkable ship really is sinking, but then the violinist stops and begins to play the first strains of “Nearer My God to Thee” by himself. People are panicking all around him. You can clearly see that, but you can only hear the music. Gradually, the other members of the band come back and join him. It is a beautiful image of what it means to draw near to God and to call others to do the same, in times of crisis and ordinary times.

Here are the lyrics of this hymn –

*¹ Nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee!
E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me,
still all my song shall be,
nearer, my God, to thee;
nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee!*

*² Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down,
darkness be over me, my rest a stone;
yet in my dreams I'd be
nearer, my God, to thee;
nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee!*

*³ There let the way appear, steps unto heaven;
all that thou sendest me, in mercy given;
angels to beckon me
nearer, my God, to thee;
nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee!*

*⁴ Then, with my waking thoughts bright with thy praise,
out of my stony griefs Bethel I'll raise;
so by my woes to be
nearer, my God, to thee;
nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee!*

*⁵ Or if, on joyful wing cleaving the sky,
sun, moon, and stars forgot, upward I fly,
still all my song shall be,
nearer, my God, to thee;
nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee!*

As we reflect upon the past liturgical year and prepare to enter Advent, what reminds you to draw near to God? Who are the people or the things that draw you closer to the Lord? How can you call others to draw near and hear the familiar story once again?