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Music: <introductory music>

Rebecca: Hello and welcome to Mind the Gap, a commentary podcast about all those verses that get left out of the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary. I am one of your hosts, Becca. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a Lutheran pastor in Michigan, and I've been serving in parish ministry for five years.

Annemarie: And I'm your other host, Annemarie. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a Lutheran pastor in New Jersey, and I've been serving in parish ministry in the ELCA for 15 years.

Rebecca: You know how the lectionary pericopes occasionally skip over a handful of verses in the middle of a passage? We are putting those pieces back into the readings so that we can hear them in their entirety and give ourselves a chance to explore what they mean altogether...

Annemarie: ...how the exclusion of those verses does or doesn't change things, and what (if any) wisdom we can gain for our preaching by minding that gap.

Music: <introductory music>

Rebecca: Up front, at the top of the episode, we want to make sure that we say thank you to everyone who has supported us on our Ko-Fi and Patreon. That's Lee and Kim, Weta, David, Jennifer, Jerry, Melissa, and Liz. We are so grateful for what you make possible through your contributions, including transcripts for our episodes which can be found on our website, mindthegaprccl.com. It is the first Sunday in Advent. We are in a new church year, folks, and we've got a great conversation ahead. But before we jump into all of that, Annemarie, I'd love to know what's on your mind.

Annemarie: As we enter into a new church year, bring on Mark. Big fan. I think that we are—this is a month, the month of December and Advent in particular, when we do a lot of focus on families and children and involving them into some of the traditions that we have in our congregations and in the church. And I just wanted to name something that I think is vitally important: agency and boundaries when it comes to working with young people and the ways in which we can create safety and opportunities for young, especially the very young, to decide about how they want to interact with especially adults. One of the ways that I do this is through at communion time. So in my church we offer communion to all the baptized. So no matter how old you are, you are welcome at the table, put your hands out, fine. If you are a young person or even an older person that doesn't receive communion yet or just chooses not to, I'm happy to give you a blessing.

When it comes to anyone getting a blessing though, I go through a little bit of a dialogue with them and I say, I've looked them in the eye and I say, can I give you a blessing? And they get to say yes or no, and then I say, can I touch your forehead thinking under five because few times in their lives do adults ask, is it okay if I touch you? And the “can I touch you” is really really important, especially to a really young person—so I'm thinking like, under five. Because few times in their lives do adults ask, “Is it okay if I touch you?” And in particular an adult who has power the way that a pastor or a lay leader does. We want to make sure that those young people know that they have the power to say no. And if they say no to me, I can still look them in the eye and I can still give them that

blessing and it's still just as powerful and effective. But of course if they say yes for the touch, I'll touch their forehead.

I'll make the sign of the cross on their forehead and they are included in what we are doing in that space in that time, and I just want all of our folks to hear that no matter what age we are, no matter where we are in church, we have the ability to say no and to tell people what we want from them and to allow them to be part of us and to touch us physically or to be part of that interaction with us and that if they say, no, it's not against us, it's just giving their intentionality and what they're comfortable with and that's really still okay. You can still have a relationship with them, but it's just something that's really, really important to me for lots of reasons. But Rebecca, what is on your mind?

Rebecca: Well, I do want to reflect back—so I do the exact same thing that you do, and others will notice it. I just today had a conversation with people at a meet and greet that I was doing because I'm new in my congregation, about that they had noticed that I was doing it and they said, "I love that." And they liked that. It made a connection with the young person in that moment. They liked the kind of back and forth and I explained everything you just explained and so on, and it's such an amazing witness, not just for those young people, but for everyone else who sees it. Yeah, it's so cool.

Annemarie: Very cool.

Rebecca: I guess quickly, just one of the things on my mind is because I am shifting Advent, and many people are shifting Advent this year, we are going to have our Advent episodes out a week early, and our Christmas a week early, so that people have that extra time if in fact you have moved the schedule. Because I think that's going to be a popular choice this year when Advent 4 falls on Christmas Eve. There's really no good options scheduling wise, but this is one way that a lot of us go about it and we want the conversations to be available. It does create kind of a weird feeling like you're kind of off kilter. I'm finding already in terms of keeping track of where we are in things, but I also think that's a little fun, feeling a little out of time is its own liminal space and that's not a bad place to be for Advent. So we have a conversation about the Psalm to jump into on this first Sunday of Advent. So how about we get going?

Music: <piano music>

Rebecca: The psalm for the first Sunday of Advent in Year B is Psalm 80:1-7, and 17-19

Annemarie: ...meaning the gap we are exploring is Psalm 80:8-16. I will be reading the assigned verses...

Rebecca: ...and I will be reading the verses that are left out of the lectionary.

Annemarie: ¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
² before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!
³ Restore us, O God;

let your face shine, that we may be saved.
4 O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
5 You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.
7 Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Rebecca: 8 You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
9 You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
10 The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;
11 it sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River.
12 Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
13 The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.

14 Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
15 the stock that your right hand planted.
16 They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.

Annemarie: 17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
18 Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.

19 Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Music: <piano music>

Annemarie: As Rebecca knows, I have a lot of notes about this.

Rebecca: I was going to say, how about you get us started, Overachiever.

Annemarie: I just got lost in all of the resources that I have!

Rebecca: It's the rabbit holes.

Annemarie: I so went down rabbit holes and I followed all of the, I took your advice to follow all of the little references that came out of the rabbit holes. So all of Psalm 80 I think is

important to take as one big piece here, and I think we like to do that most of the time with our gaps anyway, but this is a communal lament, right? This is a group of people who are lamenting from the northern kingdom, so that's an important thing. It's three stanzas and three refrains. If you heard the refrain, it is restore us, oh Lord God of hosts, let your face shine that we may be saved. It's thought that this could be a song, this could be sung together, but also that if you were preaching this, if you wanted to focus on this alongside the mark 16 or mark 13 gospel, you could weave that restore us, oh God, into that mark text as well.

That was a note that I saw in one of the resources I looked at, and this is really about referencing all the way back to when the people of God were gathered in the tent of meeting with the arc. You are enthroned upon the cherubim. That's a reference to the arc of the covenant, Ephraim and Benjamin and Manas. We have Benjamin who's a tribe and Ephraim Manas that are kind of half tribes, and this is kind of like a callback to the very beginnings of God's people and the life of faith that they shared together. And so they're asking God to restore us all the way back to that and then acknowledging that maybe God isn't so happy with them, maybe God is not so happy and that the suffering they have endured at this point, it's probably by the Assyrians. They're asking God to basically take them back.

God is angry because the people prayed for blessing even though they oppressed their neighbors and lived unjustly. So if we go to the gap, this isn't really interesting gap because the vine, you brought a vine out of Egypt and drove out the nations and planted it. The vine of Egypt was mentioned in every single one of the resources that I looked at and talked about that this is reminds us of God and God's ability to create and God will move the vine, right? So the vine out of Egypt would be the people of God as they came out in the exodus, but moved it and plant and replanted it somewhere else to take root and fill the land and then at the same time and even become bigger than the cedars and bigger than everything else. Why would you do all of that work and then verse 12 and 13, break down the walls and let it be plundered over by anyone who walked by. This is really showing us that there is this layout of history and of suffering and laying it all out in a way that says, God, we are at your mercy. We are at the mercy of what you have done for us. And so God, please be strong for us again, be for us. What you have always said, you are restore us, let your face shine that we can be saved. But that's just a little bit of the things, the notes that I have.

Rebecca: Well, this gap falls under that pattern. We were noticing where what ends up getting taken out is the summary of salvation history, right? It's exactly what we were talking about a couple of weeks ago. I wanted to name right now, and it's hard and frustrating because it's going to be outdated before we even publish this episode, but just in the midst of the current flareup in Israel and Gaza, I have a hard time hearing this gap in particular and these recitations that have to do with the blessing of the promised land because of the reference to the fact, I mean this one's very explicit versus eight, you drove out the nations and planted it, you cleared the ground for it. And even in verse 11, it basically is that modern call that we hear about from the river to the sea, and that's really hard to hear right now and to know what to do with living in that tension of having an ancient text from 3000 years ago and understanding why ancient peoples would celebrate this and how they would interpret it as divine favor and that it is written in response to an invasion that they were facing or experienced themselves from Assyria, like you said, and just having to hold the tension of all that with listening to it in a

modern context with our modern understandings about what forced removal of people's is and acceptable behavior of modern nation states.

I don't know that there's a way to make this easy to hear and leading into as Christians a season when we are anticipating the prince of peace. I don't know where to go with that other than to say that's hard and there's tension in it right now and it feels important to at least acknowledge.

Annemarie: I think you're absolutely right, and I think that, I think that's why we like this project so much that we're doing. So we have the ways that we can hear and explore these texts academically, which is what I really did. And at the same time, we have to hold them intention with what we're in the moment right now. And I will say that even as I was taking notes on this, what you were just saying was playing through my head the entire time, right? So the complexity of this, the geography, I think when we think of the modern places where this has occurred, we can't ignore the tensions there and we can't ignore how the world has been asked to pick sides. How I think the global community has and that the politicalization of this in a way that is all or nothing. It's messy and it's historical and it's coming from places.

It's a place that isn't always familiar to you and I right as far as how we live and where we are and what we take for granted all the time. And so I think that as preachers, I know that it can be tricky to name those things and I don't think that we have to make this text mean something else. If you're going to use this in worship, I think you have to let it mean what it means, but that the peace that we're looking for can only be really understood through the peace of God.

Rebecca: I like the point about let it mean what it means. We don't have to come up with a interpretation that makes it make sense or makes it pretty or simplifies it For us, it's okay to let scripture be complicated, and I'm wondering if it's another example of times when it's wise to let scripture be in conversation with itself to remind ourselves that for every, maybe not every Psalm like this, but in addition to Psalms like this, there are the passages about God will gather all nations to him in Zion and things like that. Maybe it's an opportunity to just let our eyes and our attention be turned to that region. I wrote my December newsletter article I about, if we're getting ready to sing O Little Town of Bethlehem, let's know what's going on in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. Let's have a heart for what's going on. Let's have a heart for the children of the region as we welcome the Christ child.

Annemarie: One of the things about this being the first week of Advent and in Advent there's this sense of "already but not yet," the end and the beginning all at the same time, and that there's this constant reminder to keep awake, to stay awake. I think that what you've just enumerated, the ways that we, if we're going to talk about Bethlehem, if we're going to refer to an area of the world like this, we need to keep awake about what's happening in those places. And the ways that we keep awake sometimes mean that we have to keep awake and keep ourselves in a place of hearing and learning and being able to hear when things are uncomfortable for us to hear and keeping awake in our discomfort, keeping awake in the ways that the world is challenging us, that God is challenging us. And to remember that at the beginning of advent, we contemplate the end.

It's this both/and, it's this, yes, we are looking toward a celebration of what God will do in the birth of Jesus, but at the same time, we're also looking at what God will do in the death of Jesus, what God will do in the resurrection of Jesus, what God will do even after that and what comes next. And so keep awake, stay awake, listen for what God's people are telling you. Listen for what the world is crying out for. Listen for the reframes of restore us O God and where they're coming from because they might come from unexpected places.

Rebecca: So on November 10th, the patriarchs and heads of Christian churches in Jerusalem put out a joint letter, and I don't have a list of who exactly that includes, but they just made a statement among other statements that have come out about things currently, particularly about Advent and Christmas in the midst of war, and are asking all of us as members of the body of Christ around the world to—

They specifically were asking about foregoing any unnecessarily festive activities. They encourage the faithful to focus more on the spiritual meaning of Christmas this year. This is word for word, “with focus directed at holding in our thoughts, our brothers and sisters, [all of our siblings], affected by the war and its consequences, and with fervent prayers for a just and lasting peace for our beloved holy land.” I think listening to people who are part of the body of Christ to what they are going through, living over there, and how specifically they are encouraging us to together observe the feast of the nativity this year, that's worth giving a lot of respect and heed to, and something to keep in mind in our preaching and in our worship leadership and everything else for this season. The lectionary in its wisdom and in that appreciation we have for it gives us these passages of tension and conflict in this season.

And it's hard in modern life. I mean, Christmas stuff has been up since before Halloween now, but to live in that space of darkness, of pain, there's power in that and there's connection to God's children in that. I think it's significant that in the Christian calendar, the new year starts when the days are still getting darker and that depends on where you are on the planet and that kind of stuff. But for us, the new year is starting when the days are still getting darker. And we are tasked with finding hope in the middle of that. And I think that this year is a year when we can't underestimate the difficulty of that, but also the power of that.

Annemarie: There was something that I read on sundaysandseasons.com that talked about, “to ready ourselves for God's arrival we plead for forgiveness.” That the readiness, the readying of ourselves is only able to happen for us to fully understand and fully be ready is to acknowledge where we fall short is to acknowledge that our need for forgiveness and to plead for it. And I think the reframe of Psalm 80, the restore us, oh God, let your face shine that we may be saved is very similar to that. Come Lord Jesus, reframe that we get in advent swiftly, come now and be need you right? We beseech you. We are begging you to come because we cannot live on our own. We will mess this up. We have already. Please, Lord, quickly come.

Music: <outro music>

Rebecca: Thank you so much for listening to our conversation this week. We hope that by minding the gap, you heard something that gave you a new insight, appreciation, or question about scripture.

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Annemarie: Now, your job is to find us @MindtheGapRCL on Instagram. Visit our website, mindthegaprcl.com, and if you really love us, support us using Ko-fi or Patreon. Share us with all your friends and colleagues.

Rebecca: Blessings on your preaching friends. And may the word of God dwell in you richly.

Music: <outro music>