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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 New York, and I've been serving in parish ministry for six 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 16 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: Thank you to everyone who has supported us on our Ko-Fi and Patreon accounts, including Lee and Kim, Weta, David, Jennifer, Jerry, Melissa, and Liz. We're so grateful for your support for this project and this episode is actually a significant milestone for this project. We have come full circle and we are back to the anniversary of our first episode. We premiered for Ash Wednesday of 2023 and here we are recording our commentary for Ash Wednesday of 2024. Round of applause. Annemarie, I have loved this project and just want to say that I am so grateful to get to spend this time with you and I have grown closer to scripture and I have learned so many new skills and I am so glad that we took this idea and just ran with it.

Annemarie: Me too. I am grateful for getting to spend more time with you and especially over the time and miles that we've been separated because of calls in life and I too am grateful for opportunity to just continue to be immersed in scripture more so, no, let's go year two.

Rebecca: Let's go. What's on your mind this week?

Annemarie: Well, I'm an interim pastor and I've been doing this particular interim work since May and when a new person comes along and you have to be doing, there's all kinds of ministry that happens in this particular context and one of the things I'm very responsible for is confirmation ministry, and I adore confirmation ministry. It is really one of my favorite things to do and for so many reasons and this past to Sunday, I feel like after a lot of stopping and starting and kind of awkwardness because teenagers and me and we've kind of hit our stride a little bit last Sunday and we had a really good conversation. I've been using the reform curriculum. I really piecemeal a lot of things together for confirmation, but I like the reform curriculum particularly because it starts with questions. It leads with questions, and so the question this week was, is the Bible true? And we had a really good discussion about the complexity of scripture, the paradox of scripture, and they laughed until they cried. They also asked some really incredible questions. They bonded together a little bit more and created some inside

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jokes, which with middle schoolers is super important and I'm just grateful to finally get to this sweet spot in confirmation ministry. All that said, Rebecca, what might be on your mind today?

Rebecca: Today I'm going to bring and share a brief Emily Dickinson poem. Actually, this is a poem that I have loved for a long time and weirdly enough it tends to just crop up at various points for weird reasons, like pieces and phrases of it might echo in random news stories or things people say to me or whatever. And that's happened a couple of times recently and this poem has long meant a lot to me in terms of how I think about and experience eternal life and I want to share with everyone.

"Forever is composed of nows," number 690 from Emily Dickinson.

Forever – is composed of Nows –
'Tis not a different time –
Except for Infiniteness –
And Latitude of Home –

From this – experienced Here –
Remove the Dates – to These –
Let Months dissolve in further Months –
And Years – exhale in Years –

Without Debate – or Pause –
Or Celebrated Days –
No different Our Years would be
From Anno Dominies –

"Forever is composed of nows," by Emily Dickinson.

Annemarie: I love that.

Rebecca: We have our first kind of repeat texts since we are coming back full circle to Ash Wednesday. There are two gaps from the first reading and from the gospel. So we have a double episode in front of us. So how about we jump in and we'll get started with the first lesson.

Music: <piano music>

Annemarie: The first lesson for Ash Wednesday is Joel 2:1-2, 12-17...

Rebecca: ...meaning the gap we are exploring is Joel 2:3-11. I will be reading the assigned verses...

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

Rebecca: 1 Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
2 a day of darkness and gloom,

a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
nor will be again after them
in ages to come.

Annemarie: 3 Fire devours in front of them,
and behind them a flame burns.
Before them the land is like the garden of Eden,
but after them a desolate wilderness,
and nothing escapes them.

4 They have the appearance of horses,
and like warhorses they charge.
5 As with the rumbling of chariots,
they leap on the tops of the mountains,
like the crackling of a flame of fire
devouring the stubble,
like a powerful army
drawn up for battle.

6 Before them peoples are in anguish,
all faces grow pale.
7 Like warriors they charge,
like soldiers they scale the wall.
Each keeps to its own course,
they do not swerve from their paths.
8 They do not jostle one another,
each keeps to its own track;
they burst through the weapons
and are not halted.
9 They leap upon the city,
they run upon the walls;
they climb up into the houses,
they enter through the windows like a thief.

10 The earth quakes before them,
the heavens tremble.
The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining.

11 The Lord utters his voice
at the head of his army;
how vast is his host!
Numberless are those who obey his command.
Truly the day of the Lord is great;
terrible indeed—who can endure it?

Rebecca: 12 Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
13 Rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.
14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain-offering and a drink-offering
for the Lord, your God?

15 Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
16 Gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.

17 Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.
Let them say, 'Spare your people, O Lord,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
"Where is their God?"

Music: <piano music>

Rebecca: I did not go back to listen to our episode from last year or read my notes or anything. So because I didn't want to repeat too much or feel influenced by that, I do remember pointing out and it's probably worth doing so again that what's being talked about in this gap is a swarm of locusts coming upon the land just because where it starts from in the second chapter does not include that specification here. So all of this imagery is in the context of a plague of locusts, which was a word that kept capturing me this time as I was reviewing everything, but wanted to make sure that at least we mentioned that since it is easy to miss.

Annemarie: Yeah, and it's important to, I think your clarification there about a plague of locusts is important as well because this is the locusts are interpreted as punishing, right? The locusts and the destruction that they, and that's the gap, right? The gap is really talking about all the destruction that the locusts are doing in and around the area. And this is a response to not paying attention to God's word, not doing what God has asked us to do. Prophets are rarely the ones just singing the praises of the people and how good they

are. Joel is a very good prophet in that way that he has good and bad news for God's people. I can hear why we might not read this on Ash Wednesday, right? I think you can hear the themes in the portions that are part of the lectionary that say things like return to Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding steadfast love and relents from punishing. I get that this gap exists for the sake of Ash Wednesday. However, the effect of that verse, which is in the second part of verse 13, I don't know if you hear the grace in that as powerfully if you don't read the gap.

Rebecca: Very true. I found myself getting caught on the word plague, which is used often in when we're talking about scripture, about the locusts. You talk about the plagues in Egypt. Plague is used here to describe the locusts and everything. And I think I was just again this year feeling that return to early 2020 and it's just, even as we get further away from that, lent is still the season that brings that up. I've found myself having conversations with people from church not on purpose and not prompted by any specific thing, but I feel like we still know even subconsciously, that, oh, our bodies are getting tense. This is the time when it happened and I can't help but hear the discussion of Plague and the way this gap is, the real acknowledgement of the devastation of the plague, like the harm it did, the terror, the suffering, and just kind of the continued value of talking about our experience in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and what we've been through there is still value in sharing those stories each other. There's still value in grieving, there's still value in continuing to try to take care of ourselves and one another in light of that as someone who just had it again over Christmas and everything. So that was an experience I was having while letting myself dwell with this word. It was taking me back to this reminder of the rhythm that our life events have built into this season now and trying to acknowledge the importance of those experiences to us.

Annemarie: I think that's incredibly important and I'm so glad that you brought that up because for as much as I've been busy with work and probably a little too distracted from all of that, and you named the Coming Tension, the coming dread of March 13th, in my mind that's the beginning of Covid March 13th, 2020 and thinking about Lent and what we thought was going to be and what is the last two days I've had conversations with people where we both related our experiences during the pandemic. We continually reference pandemic time or pre covid as a frame of reference for time forever. That's going to be in the timeline this giant piece of before and after. It's going to be that signpost that was this before Covid or after Covid. And at the same time my admin just came back to work today after being away for almost a week tending to her parents who had Covid and we're still dealing with, we're better at dealing with infection and that stuff and vaccine, but we're almost, it's scary because we've almost as a culture decided to just keep moving and in some ways not acknowledge this even if the tension in our bodies is telling us that this is something that we can't ignore. I'm really glad that you mentioned that.

Rebecca: Yeah, I don't always know how I feel about that link that the word plague brings to me. Now. I still question does this count, what did that mean? And trying to let myself acknowledge, no, that was pretty world shattering and a pretty bad thing that we all collectively experienced. So I think that the word plague is just something fundamentally different to me now Post Pandemic. And I just also wanted to kind of offer up that there's a really good new podcast coming out from WNYC studios. It's the third season of Blind Spot, which does limited run seasons about various, often overlooked issues of history. Their first season was about the road to nine 11. The second season was about

the Tulsa race riots, and this current season is called The Plague in the Shadows and it's about HIV and aids. And it's telling as much as that whole event is under acknowledged and filled with stories that we're not told in a timely fashion and stories that went unheard.

Blind Spot is particularly looking at the even more buried stories from the HIV and AIDS epidemic stories of pediatric patients with aids, stories of women with AIDS when it was mostly talked about as a disease of gay men and so on. So I just wanted to mention that as a resource, whether for this or just other to be listened to at another time for edification and education, the podcast Blind Spot, their current season is the Plague in the Shadows, and that was the other thing I heard as commentary after commentary referred to the plague of locusts. I just kept being reminded about this work coming out.

Annemarie: First of all, love when we plug into another podcast during our podcast that's just podcast etiquette. So to bring it back to Ash Wednesday and what are we doing on this day, but acknowledging our earthly limitations. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. I've been joking that because it again falls on Valentine's Day, which it did I think five years ago or so. I've been saying, oh yeah, the theme of the day is I love you, I you're going to die. And that's kind of what this is, right? Yeah. My point before wasn't that the plagues are God's intention to punish us. I think the prophet interprets it that way because that's what prophets do, right? Prophets have to interpret what is happening as helping people understand God's will, helping understand what it is that God wants for them. And if they have to interpret these big, sometimes meteorological, sometimes just naturally occurring.

We know locusts have a life cycle and we know they come out every so many years depending on the kind of locust and where they are. We know the natural laws of that. And I don't think that this plague talk means that when we talk about the pandemic or we talk about HIV aids or the Tulsa race riots. And I love that that's what this podcast is focusing on because I think that all of those things brought destruction and the death not just of people, but of in some ways cultures and the deaths of generations. We lose so much when we ignore the suffering of our neighbor. We lose more for ourselves than we can ever imagine. And that blind spot, so to speak, becomes the, well, if it's not happening to me, it must not be happening at all. And what Joel I think is here trying to remind the people of that he's speaking to is this is happening and this is something that we need to acknowledge and then say to God to turn around, to repent, to get right with what we know to be what God wants from us, which is to love our neighbor to, and that's been the goal of God in most of scripture, is for God's people to see God first and to listen to what God is saying.

Yes, we are dust and to dust, we will return. And that even as dust, we are loved even as those mortals God has chosen us to love.

Rebecca: And thank you for leading us to say explicitly that just because antiquity, the only way they understood the natural world was as being under God's control. And that wasn't even just the Hebrew people. That was just how you interacted with the world around you. It was under deities control. And we don't have to see it exactly the same way now, and we don't have to experience these things as punishment or as divine displeasure to see that the calling in the face of, if it's not a plague of locusts, it might be a plague of a virus. If it's not a plague of a virus, it might be a storm. If it's not a storm, it might be a

broken relationship. It might be a house fire, it might be whatever it is that is bringing the terror and the hurt into our lives that the encouragement is to not let our response be despair or blame or turning against one another, but turning toward God and God's steadfast love, turning our hearts in all of their vulnerability in all of their brokenness, turning them toward the source of hope and grace and mercy and letting that flow through us as individual people and as communities.

And that's an evergreen thing that we need to hear, whether it's 4,000 years ago in a League of Locusts or it's the 2020s and it's stay at home orders or it's hurricanes or anything else that we're facing, especially on Ash Wednesday, just like you said.

Annemarie: Yeah. Why don't we look at the next one. Why don't we look at Matthew?

Rebecca: I think we're ready. Yeah.

Annemarie: Yeah.

Music: <piano music>

Rebecca: The gospel reading for Ash Wednesday is Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21...

Annemarie: ...meaning the gap we are exploring is Matthew 6:7-15. I will be reading the assigned verses...

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

Annemarie: 1 'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Rebecca: 'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

'Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Annemarie: 16 'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

19 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Music: <piano music>

Rebecca: So I got to say reading this right after our conversation around Joel, I wish I had listed capitalism among the plagues. That's all I have to say.

Annemarie: Darn capitalism.

Rebecca: I don't know. I just hear a lot of economics in the whole passage, including in the gap because of the way the original words of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew talk about debt and debtors. And I think that we shouldn't so quickly spiritualize that, right? So yeah, in light of the conversation we just had this whole gospel and also especially the gap, make me think about the leg of what economics that are mired in injustice and inequality can also do to our communities and to our hearts and our relationship to God.

Annemarie: Indeed. If this wasn't an Ash Wednesday text, this is one of the best stewardship texts that we have, especially that last verse of where your heart is there, your treasure will be where your treasure is. Sorry, there your heart will be. Also, I find it interesting that the gap is the Lord's prayer on a day that starts us on a season of getting back into practices that bring us closer to our life of faith and our connection to God and each other. I think it's very fascinating to have all of this to leave in all of the what not to right, do not heap. All of these things do not be like the hypocrites do not sound the trumpet. And the one time where in this kind of section of Matthew where Jesus is like, but here's what you should do

Is what the gap is. So it kind of gives Ash Wednesday this very law, here's all the rules for the season of Lent as we begin, and why being reminded of your mortality is going to be important here. When in fact, I think when you were reading the Lord's Prayer, I was just smiling because it's my favorite prayer it covers when everyone asks me. I never know what to pray when I'm at a meal or someone asks me to pray. A lay person typically will say that, and I go the Lord's Prayer. It's the best prayer. Jesus told us to pray it. What

better recommendation is there than Jesus's own word? But it is such a complete prayer in its vulnerability, in its naming of God. And I think it speaks to us and to God in ways that are really complex still. I think we grow into the Lord's prayer throughout our lives and it becomes something that we lean into pretty severely, especially at the end of our lives.

Rebecca: There's a really solid book that I've read called *The Greatest Prayer* by John Dominic Crossan, and it goes led by line through the Lord's Prayer and everything. And I just referenced it recently, the chapter about give us This Day, our Daily Bread addresses a lot of the economic realities of the time in order to be able to put it in a context. So I was recently, I brought it up in the sermon when we had Jesus calling the first disciples and they left their fishing nets and everything. It was like, okay, well, what was fishing like on the Sea of Galilee around this time? All of that say just that. That is a really an accessible, solid read about the Lord's Prayer that I think is helpful for ministers and preachers, but also could be read by lay folks and everything. So just kind of bringing that up as a possibility. I think you could do fun things with the Lord's Prayer through Lent. It would be super easy to theme a lent around the different clauses of the Lord's Prayer and everything. Take it a verse at a time and just really dwell with that and see what it has to say to your community.

Annemarie: The way that we approach the Lord's Prayer, I think changes throughout our lives and every once in a while, maybe on rotation, taking a Lent to really dive into the Lord's prayer intentionally, clause by clause, phrase by phrase, really can help us even pray it differently throughout my life. There's been times when I would say different pieces of it in different intonations, right? So there was a time, I think in college when I was really concerned with forgiveness and when we talked about forgive us our sins, I would then say, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And I would really emphasize that for myself. I would emphasize that for just as a part of my own prayer life that I needed to hear better. And I don't do that anymore because I'm not in a phase of life that I need to focus on that anymore.

But I think that being able to spend some time with the Lord's prayer is never a bad thing. But again, I would argue that, I mean, I'm preaching on Ash Wednesday, unlike last year, and I am really tempted to add this back in, if only not for the sake of needing to preach on the Lord's Prayer in particular on this particular day. But I think for the sake of balancing out the command and the law of this section of Matthew for the sake of hearing that Jesus has given us instruction on what to do instead. And yeah, I think it might help give us some balance and give us some ways to even think more further about what the season of Lent is going to offer us and what the significance of Ash Wednesday might be.

Rebecca: And since in our conversation for Joel, you brought us back to the mortality piece of Ash Wednesday. I think there's something to be said for the way words like the Lord's Prayer at the end of a long life are often some of the things that can still be reached for and found even when a lot of other words elude us, even if it's not at the end of a long life, but at the end of an illness or something else, or in midst of a tragic accident when a family has not had time to find the words of their own. There's something to be said for being able to go to this prayer that we know so well, that it's ingrained in our bodies, our tongue knows it. Our lips know it without us having to put thoughts to it. And on a day when we are thinking about and acknowledging the frailty of everything that we are and

that we have, the Lord's Prayer is a gift for those moments. And I think there could be something really powerful in reading this gap and acknowledging that for people.

Annemarie: And the last thing I just want to say too about that, that I think is important to add is when everything else has failed us in our minds and our memories in our bodies, when I've been with people who have significant memory loss or people who are very much approaching the end of their life at whatever time, even if they haven't been speaking all that much in general, or their ability to remember is really quite lost, they always know this. The Lord's Prayer is, especially for folks that have a life of faith to lean into the Lord's Prayer gets nestled into our minds and our hearts in a way that never leaves us. It is as accessible as anything ever was, especially when it comes to memory loss and brain injury. And I think that it's a gift for those folks, and it's one of those things as a pastor, when we can pray together with family members and that person and they can hear them, remember something like that, it is one of the most wonderful and holy moments that we can have.

And it is because of what Jesus has given us to pray together in the midst of trying to help us also know that our life of faith, yes, is meant to be public, is meant to be something we live into in all ways of our lives, but not meant to shame, not meant to be over and above our neighbor, and that this prayer is the same for all of us. There is no version of this that is better or worse. This is our prayer in any language, in any circumstance. This is the prayer of followers of Jesus.

Rebecca: It unites us across time and space with loved ones who have joined the great cloud of witnesses and those that are yet to join us on earth. And that's a power that can't be underestimated.

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.

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>