

Advent 4: Sermon for Church of Reconciliation
December 22, 2019
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“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer”

AMEN

Good morning. It’s an honor to preach on this Fourth Sunday of Advent. As if you needed to be reminded, this is the final Sunday before Christmas day. For many of us that means that this is a particularly stressful time of year, full of pre-holiday preparations, tasks to complete, presents to buy, and things to get in order. For others of us, perhaps, it is a more difficult time still, especially for those dealing with various forms of grief—it is now widely known that the holiday season tends to make our feelings of loss and grief more raw, and it smarts even more when everything around us tells us what a “most wonderful” time of year it is.

As I was writing my message yesterday, my wife and I had been preparing our relatively small two bedroom apartment for a total of 7 guests, including one infant, and our rambunctious and endlessly energetic cat. As we put together the shopping list, discussed our trips to pick up guests at the airport, and began putting together a strategy to clean the apartment, I began to find myself distracted, even at times paralyzed, by the amount of work and preparation that lay ahead of us...

Now -- Advent is supposed to be a time of preparation, expectation, and eager waiting for a greater reality that is to break in on us and the world at any moment—In this respect, Advent can be a fruitful time of self-examination, solitude, and a productive urgency that alerts us to the things of real substance in our lives and our world.

But as the holiday stress bore down on me yesterday, and I succumbed to the false urgency of the season with its demands to buy and achieve perfection—I realized that perhaps this is the dark side of Advent—Advent can be a time that engenders anxiety instead of expectation, fear instead of empowering love, and paralysis instead of the inspiration to move forward and live abundantly.

Even some of the Scripture readings from prior Advent Sundays can have a rather scary sound to them that can intimidate and make fearful, even if they are not intended to paralyze us, but rather to alert us to the urgency and reality of the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps some of you find yourselves experiencing this dark side of Advent too. Whether it is the stress of the holidays, or the grief made more painful by the memories of happy holidays past, perhaps you, too, feel that the uncertain future has more cause to be feared than eagerly anticipated and embraced---

If, indeed, you feel this way, your experience is normal, even if this, less than cheery, dark side of the Advent season is rarely spoken of or acknowledged in the public sphere.

The readings from Scripture, however, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent came as a breath of fresh air to me as I prepared today’s message, and I hope they will be so for you too. Both the readings from the prophet Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew, portray a God who emerges out of a context of fear and uncertainty about the future—these readings not only address and validate our experience of this stressful and scary dark side of Advent, but also reassures as to the character of this Messiah whom we anticipate and give us reason to hope.

Let us first turn briefly to our reading from Isaiah. The setting is one of political crisis, as the King of Judah, Ahaz, faces the ominous enemies of Israel and Syria to the north. Yet this crisis of looming war, uncertainty,

and dark times, is also the context in which Immanuel is first promised—that is “God with us.” It is at Judah’s most vulnerable and impotent moment that it is declared that God is not some distant, fearsome being, but rather an immanent presence, and not only that, but is with us and for us. That dark, fearful and dreadful sense of awaiting a grim future melts away in the promise of a child who represents Divine Presence and who foreshadows a future that is full of justice and peace, and not the future of our deepest fears.

Our reading from the Gospel of Matthew similarly sets a narrative setting of fear, shame, and uncertainty. It is interesting to think that in the first instance, Mary’s pregnancy was not the joyful occasion of two happy parents—for Joseph at least, it was cause for disgrace and fear—fear of what might happen to both Mary and himself in their community. For one’s betrothed to be with child in those times, was, at worst, punishable by the death of the woman. For Joseph, and perhaps for Mary as well, the conception of Jesus was hardly “good news” and certainly did not have the effect of “God with us.” Indeed, for Joseph, who is described in our passage as a righteous, that is a “Torah-abiding” man, he may have felt precisely the opposite—after years of piety and devotion, and faith in God, perhaps God was not with him, but against him in this cruel and unexpected twist of fate—

See, it is not in a context of complete tranquility and complacent acceptance of a bright future that Advent comes to us and offers hope. Advent, at its best, speaks its truth to us precisely when we are most doubtful, anxious, and beholden to dark future—

So it is in this story of Joseph. Wracked with grief and fear, this righteous man drifted off into an uneasy sleep—and it was then, through a dream, that an angel, a messenger of the divine, spoke to him. The angel first calls Joseph by name, assuring him that he is known to God—he is not a nameless cog in a vast system. The angel, aware of Joseph’s anxiety and fear, tells him not to fear taking Mary as his wife. Despite all the social consequences and judgments that would have surrounded Mary’s pregnancy, Joseph is assured that he should not be afraid to come alongside Mary, and publicly solidify their marriage and commitment to one another and the child. Moreover, Joseph is told that this child will be a Messiah who dispels fear and anxiety, one who will not condemn and judge people for their sins but will save and unburden them from sin. The angel assures Joseph that this unexpected pregnancy is not God’s judgment against him, but rather the very representation of God’s presence with him and all humans. This Messiah will be ultimate proof of God’s solidarity and identification with humans.

That is good news indeed. That is a reality to embrace. The Kingdom that this Messiah represents and heralds is certainly one which should invite us into its future, not drive us away in fear and anxiety.

This is not to say that the more apocalyptic and scary-sounding Advent passages do not have their place, or that we do not have a Jesus who, in addition to saving from sin, also said of himself that he came not to bring peace but a sword—but these passages are not meant to induce panic and fear into the hearts of those burdened by grief or stress—they actually point us to time of greater fulfillment, in which the current unjust conditions of the world system must be actively opposed. That also is a future to be embraced, though working toward that Kingdom is far from easy or pleasant.

So if this morning, or during this Advent season, you have been feeling more burdened than liberated, more stressed than reassured, and more anxious than empowered, the Gospel, that is God’s good news, announces that though the future is indeed uncertain, it may be welcomed—for the divine is not some distant power that either ignores our plight or oppresses us with overwhelming control, but is rather with us and for us. God with us, Immanuel, the Spirit of Christ who indwells us, is not a spirit of fear. The promise of God with us is the acknowledgment that Christ is working in us and through us to be agents and practitioners of Jesus’ way of love.

Now, the coming of Jesus did not immediately solve world hunger, or eliminate the reality of sin in the world, nor does it instantly make all our fears, worries and grief disappear. The reality of God with us is not an instantaneous cure-all. God with us, Immanuel, is the reality that Jesus lived a comprehensive and genuinely human life. Jesus was not unfamiliar with the feelings of grief, dread, fear and abandonment. Indeed, how paradoxical is it that the very same Jesus who is Immanuel, God with us, is the very same Jesus who cried, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” The Advent promise of Immanuel is not a trite and empty assurance that all is well and everything will be okay. It is something much deeper—it speaks to the fact that God is with us and for us, even when, perhaps especially when, we suffer—and the world suffers. The promise and truth of Immanuel, is that our whole human experience is validated in the divine life—our whole selves, even our fears, our grief, and our worries—are embraced and redeemed. Jesus, our brother, lived as one of us, and demonstrates for us that God is not the same as fate, but rather that God is more like a human than anything else, and that God’s home is not somewhere out there or up there, but with us and among us. Immanuel God is present in Isaiah’s oracle of the very real hope for political peace. Immanuel God is present in Joseph’s courage to wed Mary and publicly acknowledge and name his son—Immanuel God is present in Jesus entire life and ministry of healing the broken, oppressed, and possessed. And Immanuel God is present in us and in this community today when we acknowledge our fears and our shortcomings, but risk embracing one another and ourselves in love and compassion rather than succumbing to the constant threat of stress and self-doubt.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, let us prepare our hearts for a Messiah who saves us from our sins, and who promises to relieve us of burdens rather than pile more on—Let us welcome Immanuel, who reminds us that each day has enough trouble of its own, so we should not unduly worry ourselves about tomorrow—tomorrow will worry about itself.

AMEN