

Sermon – Nov. 29, 2020

Loving God,

May our reflections on scripture this day, inspire us to be strong followers of Jesus in both word and deed. Amen.

Today we go back to the beginning...

The first Sunday in Advent marks the beginning of our yearly re-telling of the Christian Story. Sunday by Sunday we will meet various characters from the bible. There will be patriarchs like Abraham; kings like David; there will be shepherds and high priests; Pharaohs, emperors and tax collectors; disciples and persecutors; there will be strong women, like Miriam, Debra, Ruth and Mary. This story has moments of certainty and doubt; moments of trust and betrayal; moments of unbearable heartache and yet surprising joy.

It is a story most improbable and even fantastical to the ears of many in our current society. That's mainly because so many people these days are imprisoned by the steel bars of materialistic thinking. But for those who are ready to listen with their heart... for those who are willing to let their deep yearnings be stirred... truths will be revealed... and lives will be transformed.

The storytelling begins with the words of the prophets. For

the early Christians reading the prophet Isaiah, they could not help but hear the words as a prophecy for events that would soon take place. For this reason, the Sundays in Advent we will recall the words of the prophet Isaiah. Today we heard:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

Isaiah 64:1-4

Next Sunday we will hear these words from Isaiah:

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all

people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Isaiah 40:3-5

And on the third Sunday in Advent – we receive these words from the prophet Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

Isaiah 61:1-3

Listen to the prophet's words with your heart:

“tear open the heavens and come down” “awesome deeds that we did not expect”

“God works for those who wait for him” “prepare the way of the LORD”

“the glory of the Lord shall be revealed” “good news to the oppressed”

“comfort for those who mourn”

Preparing... waiting... hoping... The themes of the Advent season...

In our Advent Study group this past week, we talked about how our reading today was given to the people of Israel when they returned from exile in Babylon. The Temple lay in ruins. People couldn't agree on whether it should be rebuilt or not. All these words from Isaiah are spoken to people who are in distress; people who are discouraged; people who are at their wits end; people who yearn to know that God has not forsaken them.

Two thousand years ago, the people of Israel were ready for some good news. They had been oppressed by one army after another for years. They felt as though they had been waiting for ages. These words of Isaiah are filled with hope and promise, because the prophet knows that, not only has God not forsaken them, but that “the glory of the LORD will be revealed.”

In the years leading up to the birth of Jesus, the writings from the book of Isaiah were probably the most read and the most familiar of the prophetic writings. They were filled with images that continued to inspire hope for the Hebrew people. Jesus would have known these writings very well. His disciples would easily recognize that Jesus was embodying the hopes and dreams of these prophecies in their own time.

You and me, Christian disciples in the 21st century, are now being called to move into a new Advent season. By

doing so we are invited to participate in the themes of preparing, waiting and hoping in the context of our own lives... which is not hard to do...

This has been a very difficult year for all of us. Because of the pandemic, nothing has gone according to plan.

Whatever we expected to happen this past year - it probably didn't happen. Did you plan to do some travelling?...probably didn't happen. Did you plan to visit family?... probably didn't happen. Did you plan a major project?... probably didn't happen. All the plans and expectations in our lives are lying in rubble like the Temple in Jerusalem.

Where do we start to pick up the pieces? Is the sense of "normal" ever going to return? You see? You're feeling the same things that the Hebrew people were feeling...

Please tear open the heavens and come down and give us some sense of hope!

In terms of the pandemic, we do have some hope... 6 months from now, things might be looking much better... but in the mean time we need to wait... we need to help each other wait...

This Advent in 2020, we will not be getting caught up in the consumerist-materialistic-jingle-jangle frenzy. No, not

this year...Let's stay focused on preparing our hearts for the awesome deeds that the world did not expect. Let's stay focused on the story of how the heavens were torn open and the glory of the Lord was revealed. Let's hold gently in our hearts the hope that will guide us and others to the awesome mystery of God's love getting ready to break in.

In NFSHS Amen.