

Year B Advent 3, December 13, 2020

✚ Following the scripture readings for Advent, two weeks ago, we found ourselves in dark times, desperately pleading for God to come down and rescue us. It felt like the end of the world was at hand and we were offered a vague and distant hope offered first in Isaiah; that our God does indeed love us: we are the work of God's hands and God will remember us. We can count on that. Then Jesus spoke of the Son of Man "*coming in clouds with great power*" to rescue us from this darkness. His only caution was that we need to be alert and ready to receive him when he comes, or we might not notice.

✚ I spoke of the dark times we are in right now, of us being in a long, dark tunnel; but these readings remind us that there is a light ahead. It is very distant and we're really not sure what it is. But there is hope as we continue to move forward in this tunnel.

✚ Last Sunday, the readings began to put a bit of clarity into this hope. The light ahead got a bit brighter. God promised the Jewish exiles in Babylon a way home and John the Baptist pointed us toward the one who was coming imminently to lead us through this tunnel to the light. We are now deep into the darkness of this tunnel, but we are getting closer to the light. I have encouraged you to dwell with these

readings during the week as we live this darkness out in the shape of COVID, and environmental and social crisis. I suggested that we don't leap straight to Christmas, because Advent with its slowly building promise and hope offers us the time and space to be ready and alert with open hearts when Christmas does come. In the Advent waiting, there is great healing.

✚ Well, today that light is closer still and the picture of what it is that is glowing ahead of us at the end of this dark tunnel suddenly gets a whole lot clearer. Our hope begins to take shape. The prophet Isaiah, anointed by God, is sent to proclaim good news for the oppressed, the broken-hearted, prisoners and all of Zion. This proclamation ends this way: *“For as the*

earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.” This light ahead is a light that rights the wrongs, that brings liberty, comfort, and justice. It is a light whose beams are fullness of life and restoration of devastations.

✚ The canticle appointed for today helps fill out this vision a bit more by both looking back and forward. This hymn or poem appears in the words of Mary in Luke's gospel, but it has a much more ancient origin in the first book of Samuel. Samuel's mother, Hannah, is unable to bear children much to her shame, as her husband's other wife had borne plenty of

children. She prays to God in desperation and God gives her a son, Samuel.

✚ Her response of joy is a great song of thanksgiving for a God who rebalances the scales: “... *the bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength ... those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil ... he raises up the poor ... and lifts the needy from the ash heap.*” The echoes of this ancient song, this ancient promise, are now heard in the mouth of Mary, who is responding with joy to her own good news – the news that in her will be born the one who incarnates these words: the one who lives them out and who will anoint us to do the same.

✚ Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is also known as Gaudete Sunday – the Sunday of joy, for the work God has been doing to bring us fullness of life is now about to be born into the world, and we hear that joy in Mary’s response.

✚ In John’s gospel, we encounter John the Baptist again. The scriptures had held this promise of a new kingdom, a new way of being from long ago. There was at that time a large movement within Judaism that believed the Messiah, the anointed one of God – anointed by God’s Spirit to turn the world upside down – this Messiah would come in their lifetime. There was a lot of excitement around John. He was charismatic, a holy monk in the desert with a definite mission from God. Was he the one? The religious leaders are skeptical and they come, probably to

reveal him as a fraud, but John denies being the Messiah. However, he does give us some big news: *“Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”* John is not the Messiah, but he is already here right among us, so don’t go away – just be ready; which is why John’s baptism is a cleansing for repentance in preparation for who he can see is already among us.

✚ So, let me recap where we are in this Advent season. In the first week of Advent, we got a glimpse of a light ahead of us, shining dimly in the darkness – a light of hope that there is life ahead, just keep going. In the second week we learnt that God has a plan to make the way to this light a lot easier, flattening hills and valleys

to bring us from exile and John the Baptist telling us that the one who will lead us on this journey isn’t here right now but he’s coming – almost here, just around the corner.

✚ Well today, my COVID-weary friends, as we linger in this dark time of anxiety; as we anticipate this still-worsening pandemic with all of its sickness, death, increased poverty and homelessness; as we fear that we might infect one another and so keep our distance; as many of us anticipate a very lonely Christmas; and even though help is on the way in the form of a vaccine – we are still looking ahead with a sense of hopelessness at having to endure many more months living with this uncertainty; into this world – into this darkness – the one we have been waiting for is already here among us.

✚ Perhaps we don't recognize him just yet, but hang in there just another 13 days and you will be able to look God's anointed one, who is Emmanuel (God with us), right in the eyes. The pieces of the plan are almost all in place. If we are ready to see it and alert for his coming, the one who will lead us out of the tunnel and into the light of God is practically in front of us.

✚ The excitement is building. We now know that God intends justice and righteousness and fullness of life for each of us. In poetic terms, the hungry are filled and the wealthy lose their share. In economic terms, the abundance of this world will finally be shared equally. This is where the anointed one will lead us if we have eyes to recognize him, ears to listen well to his

words and hearts that are open to God's grace and filled with love for God and for our neighbours.

✚ This is the light that is coming into the world, the light that John the evangelist says will not be dimmed. This is the end of our hope – the light at the end of the tunnel. John the Baptist says he's already among us, so don't give up. All will soon be revealed, just a bend or two down the tunnel. This is what Christmas is all about, and it is coming, COVID or not!

✚ Our waiting is now rich with the anticipation of God being with us. The light is now bright enough that we can proceed without fear of stumbling in the dark. All that is left now is to

know how all this will happen, but that is a story for next week.

✚ For this week, just stay with the anticipation. Keep listening for the voice of God as it speaks to you in today's readings. What is it like to live in this dark time knowing in your heart that COVID and death and disaster, even war and environmental collapse of the whole planet don't have the last word? There is life beyond all of that. Hold onto that knowledge in anticipation and yes, now is the time to get ready in your heart and your home. Get the baking done, the house decorated, the presents wrapped because right around the next turn, God is about to turn the whole world upside down: and that is something worth celebrating!