

Year B Advent 4, December 20, 2020

✚ So, we've been weaving our way through Advent, guided by the stories and words of scripture over the past few weeks, and now we come to the last Sunday of this short season. Christmas is still 5 days away. We're almost there, but not quite. In this challenging time of disease, lockdowns and all the other lamentable things I been listing in my preaching through Advent – in all of this, I have encouraged you to live each day as it comes to us, but with the undercurrent of hope that has been built upon each week in the Sunday readings and hymns and prayers.

✚ We began with a reminder from Isaiah that God loves us and has not forgotten us. Jesus invited

us into a mystery – waiting for “the Son of Man to come...” Then, again in Isaiah, a picture of the extremes to which God will go to rescue us – flattening mountains and building up valleys to make a straight highway. And John the Baptist appeared on the scene, first telling us that he was here to prepare us for the arrival of God's anointed one and then last week telling us that actually, he is already here among us to fulfill the words of Isaiah who spoke of the one who would proclaim good news for the oppressed, the broken-hearted, prisoners and all of Zion.

✚ I spoke of this dark time we are in as being like a tunnel and as we pass through it, at first there

is a dim light ahead – a sign that what lies before us isn't just more darkness, but light and life. Then as our Advent readings have developed in the past three weeks, they have drawn us closer to that light and slowly it has been revealing something that God has been up to – the mechanism of our hope. As we complete the Advent cycle of readings today, all is now revealed. We discover just what God is up to: an incredible and mysterious entrance of God's very self into the world. The one who is coming is God's own self.

✚ Now, if this were a Bible study or a workshop on scripture, we would be parsing every phrase and asking critical questions about historical fact versus theological truth. Did it really happen this way? If I had a smartphone at the

time, could I have captured that angel on video? If not, what is the truth of this story? But here in worship, just five days before Christmas, let's stick with the story which holds deep truth for us. Let's continue on our journey into the Word God speaks to us in these stories.

✚ In these stories and poems of David, Nathan, a temple, God, an angel and a young girl called Mary the picture that has slowly been coming into focus through Advent is now in focus. So, here's the story.

✚ King David, a lowly youngest brother with no status – a shepherd boy - is chosen by God to become king of Israel, and what a king he becomes. He's far from perfect, but he solidifies the economy, defeats enemies, and

brings an unparalleled time of prosperity and safety to Israel. His reign sees Israel at its peak.

✚ David has many flaws, but he is well aware of the fact that he rules at the whim of God and that God is the source of Israel's prosperity. So, one day he is sitting in his luxurious palace overlooking the lush Kidron valley, and he thinks about poor old God. God, who defied the usual rules of deities at the time and left his territory to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt. When God wasn't being a pillar of fire at night or a burning bush, the people housed their beloved God in an ark – a very fancy, jewel-encrusted box that they carried with them and kept in a tent at night.

✚ When they finally settled in the land of Canaan, the land God had provided for them, the tent remained – along with the ark. This was God's home, and David (maybe out of a sense of guilt – or genuine humility – he was capable of both) thought that God's house should be even more spectacular than his own palace. God needed a temple not some dusty little tent.

✚ But God says: “Have I ever asked for a temple? No, no, no. Instead, I'm going to build you a house David – that is - a dynasty that will last forever.” Only, like so much of what God does, this promise is lived out in an odd way. David does pass on his kingdom to his son Solomon (who does build a temple), and the dynasty continues, but only until 586BCE, when the Babylonians flatten the country and exile all its

leaders and elites. So much for an eternal “House of David”. So much for that promise we heard in Psalm 89, where God says:

“Forever I will preserve your descendants and maintain your throne from generation to generation.”

✚ It is in the mystery of this promise that we find the connection to Christmas: to Mary, Joseph, the angel and coming soon to a stable near you – the baby Jesus. It is in this mystery that we find our hope. This is the light that is so close now that it is almost blinding.

✚ About 150 years before the collapse of the House of David, the first part of Isaiah is written. Isaiah confronts King Ahaz, who wearies God with his lack of trust. Isaiah can

see what’s coming – if not tomorrow, then some time, because one after another, the Davidic kings prove to be faithless and corrupt. So, in chapter 7, Isaiah says this: *“O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”*

✚ From those words, and from other passages in Isaiah and other prophets, a picture slowly forms over the centuries of One who is to come from this Davidic line of kings that will undo the harm done by this House of David. Over the years, this One comes to be called the anointed one of God – or in Hebrew – the Messiah: the one who will come on clouds with glory to

restore God's reign on earth. This Messiah is a long-held hope of Israel. At times, Messianism was very popular and common in Jewish religion. During the Roman occupation at the time of Jesus' birth was one of those times.

✚ So, we enter into this world of hope that God will send a Son – anointed to save Israel and ultimately all the world, as the restored power of God flowing from Jerusalem leads all the world to bow down before God and be drawn to worship at the temple. This is the world pictured by Isaiah.

✚ In this world, a young girl named Mary is visited by an angel – a heavenly messenger of God. This angel says: *“you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name*

him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

✚ Sticking with the plot line, the source of this light at the end of the dark COVID tunnel we are in is God's very self. It is Jesus, the Son of the Most High, born to Mary and adopted into the line of king David by Joseph who sticks by Mary after his own angelic visitation. This is what God has been up to. We have heard rumours, and seen something ahead of us in the tunnel, and now, here it is!

✚ Right now, we are in real need of some hope: this darkness is getting oppressive. And in our Advent journey, we have continued on our way, faithfully following this light in the hope that it really does mean something to us. As it turns out, it does. In the language of story, it means that God's very self has come to be with us. The eternal has met the ordinary, physical world we live in to bring us from a moribund darkness to eternal light and life.

✚ In everyday terms, it means that whatever our lives look like; whether bright and cheery, dark and gloomy, filled with laughter or with suffering – God is with us. The God who has promised us that we are loved with a love that will never leave us; this God born as one of us into this world is the light that will never be

dimmed – no matter what. As the Apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, nothing – not even death – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, who we will find waiting for us to embrace in an animal feeding trough in a stable in an ordinary little town just a few more steps down this tunnel. So, let's join the shepherds and wise men and make our way to Bethlehem. I'll see you there in a few days!