

Advent 2 December 2, 2020

A couple of days ago Vice President Pence spoke to say that we will have a “Season of Hope.” He was not talking about Advent, but rather commenting on the coming of vaccines that look to be very effective in controlling the spread of the coronavirus. While I appreciate his optimism, it seems to me that the predictions of Dr. Anthony Fauci, Dr. Deborah Brix and Dr. Robert Redfield, that we face a, “long, dark winter” are perhaps more grounded in the reality we now face in this pandemic. I think the assessment of these noted infectious disease experts, with over a century of combined public health service are the voices we need to heed in the coming months. Already the shocking rise in Covid-19 cases, reports of hospitals at capacity, other reports that Covid-19 has become the leading cause of death in the nation and finally the grim death toll which is rapidly approaching 300,000 is just all evidence this long, dark winter now has our nation in its icy grip. Of course, during this time, there are still things we can all do, measures we can all put into place, as I’m sure we are all aware, and I’m pleased to see that the Centers for Disease Control under Dr. Redfield’s leadership is now issuing much more stringent guidelines for wearing masks, physical distancing and avoiding gatherings than was previously the case. Perhaps a bit late, especially in the light of the terrible new numbers that come on a daily basis, but still welcome nevertheless as a means to educate and convince our fellow citizens to help us to get the spread of the coronavirus under control. Yes, a long, dark winter, but still there are actions we can take to help and to decrease the impact of this terrible pandemic.

Prayer: O most merciful and gracious God, today in Advent we hear your word of comfort and peace, may our hearts be open to you and our souls dedicated to following your word for our lives, this we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend.

The Vice President’s “Season of hope,” while not very good image for our nation as we continue to undergo the ravages of the pandemic, I think those words can describe our time in the church right now: in past years I have used the phrase, “Season of hope,” to describe what I believe is the major emphasis of Advent. This year, in the midst of the increasing death and destruction of the pandemic, it seems like a particularly ill-fitting description, though. But it is precisely because of the cognitive dissonance of talk about hope in the midst of a long, dark winter that I think might be a place God calls us to in this Advent time. A few years ago during Advent I preached about the understanding that the biblical scholar Professor Walter Bruggemann has written about as a way for us to come to a deep faith during Advent. Professor Bruggemann has focused a good deal of his scholarly attention on the prophets. He is keenly interested in those who brought the Word of God to

the people of Israel. This interest stems from Bruggemann's own conviction that the Word of God the prophets spoke to the people of Israel is a message to us, to you and me in our day (and also, as Bruggemann tells us, a message to strengthen his own faith as well). First, bringing God's word to the people is the call and the vocation of the prophets: out of the ordinary circumstances of life, the prophets bring God's word to the people a word of judgement, a word of hope, a word of God's divine love come into the world. For Bruggemann, this is a radical word, meaning that it reaches to the very roots of Israel's faith, a radical word that opens the hearts and souls of the people of Israel to a reality beyond their own: the reality of God's call to live in justice and peace, the call of God to live in accord with God's purpose, God's hope and God's own desire. It is this radical aspect of the prophetic call, an aspect that transforms us as those who follow God's way, opening our hearts and souls to the depth of divine love. This second aspect, the manner in which the Word of God transforms the hearers, this is what gives us hope as we are changed in this encounter with God's word, we are opened to the very power of God in our lives.

Today we hear the word of the prophet Isaiah, a word first spoken over two and a half millennia ago to the people of Israel as they faced a great national catastrophe. Israel's leaders have sold the people out: the nation of Israel is conquered, carried off to exile in a foreign land. This is a total disaster. Yet in the midst of the worst, when it seems the darkest and most foreboding, when all hope is lost, when death and the final confrontation are as near as can be imagined, then Isaiah speaks the Word of God. And what is that Word? Indeed, probably the last thing expected by the people in their misery and suffering: "Comfort, comfort ye, my people. Speak tenderly, saith the Lord." How can Isaiah speak this Word? What can a word of comfort possibly mean in these circumstances? Comfort, comfort a word of hope: a word that demands the most radical use of imagination, to see in the midst of death the way to new life, to open up our minds to the way of God in contrast to the ways of this world, to see the power of God's actions to transform our world. The prophetic imagination is to see the possibility of God's tenderness in the midst of the harsh realities of our world. The prophetic imagination of Isaiah is to point to God's loving kindness in the midst of the cruel realities of the world, to show how God will feed the flock like a shepherd, arms the lambs in a tender embrace, gently leading the mother sheep to the place of rest and refreshment.

A few centuries later a new prophet arrives on the scene in Israel, but the message is still the same: In the midst of the disasters of his day, John the Baptist cries out. John brings the people out to a new place: out to the wilderness to re-enact once more Israel's journey toward freedom, to re-engage with the movement

from oppression to liberation. John calls the people to repentance, but this does not mean simply to acknowledge their sins and shortcomings. No, here repentance means setting off in a new direction: with a new consciousness, with a new spirit, setting off in a new direction understanding that now God can act in a new way. John points to the changes that God will bring about, to bring God's savior into the world, to show the world the full power of God's love. John points ahead to the coming of the Messiah, but it is not so far off as to be simply a point of interest: no, as John is aware through his new consciousness, this Messiah is coming soon; the advent of the savior is immanent, so now is the time to prepare the way. John's powerful prophetic preaching is dramatic in Mark's Gospel account, so that as we hear this Gospel story, as we listen to this Good News, we have our hearts and minds and souls opened to the coming of Jesus and we are re-oriented by this powerful Word.

As we gather here today, we gather in a way that is similar to the gatherings of of spiritual ancestors. Sure, we now use our technology to gather in prayer and fellowship, we gather once again on Zoom, staring into our computer screens in a fashion our spiritual ancestors from an earlier non-technological age never could have imagined; but although the manner of our gathering is so different, what brings us together on a deeper level is still the same, the longing and deep yearning to find a place for ourselves amidst the dire situation and chaos of our world. We too are in a time of exile, just as the people of Israel were forced into exile by the waters of Babylon thousands of years ago, just as the people later the people found themselves under the heavy hand of Roman oppression and journeyed out into the wilderness to her the Word of God from a strange prophet God sent them. But in this yearning, in this longing during our exile, the Word of God comes to us as well, turning our hearts and minds to God, transforming our souls as we encounter the power of God's love supreme in the midst of times that seem hopeless and full of despair. Today, as fresh as the time in which they were first spoken, Isaiah's word, "Comfort, comfort ye my people, speak ye peace thus saith the Lord," these words are the word of our God that will stand forever, God's loving promise and never failing kindness to her us up in the depth of distress.

We gather now as well once again in Advent, the time sent aside for us in the Church year to prepare for God's love becoming manifest in our world, to prepare for God's love being ever-present in our lives. We prepare for the coming of the savior, Jesus Christ, into our world and into our lives, bringing to each one of us the full power of God's mercy and grace, to bring to you and me the depth of God's peace for our lives. This is a season of hope, but in a much deeper sense than Vice President Pence meant: in the midst of this long, dark winter we are undergoing, in

the midst of a pandemic that seems so overwhelming, overwhelming our medical facilities and taking its toll on our frontline medical workers, overwhelming our own psychic and spiritual lives as we are still forced apart and our sense of community and belonging is fractured and exiled, yet the word of God that comes to us today is this word of hope for the season, a word of hope that is sufficient to bear up our lives in God's love. As we move deeper into this season, we are assured in God's word that this exile is not forever, that the light is coming into our world. But just as importantly, we can live in hope because even in the midst of this exile, even during this long, dark winter, God is with us, walking each step along the way, present with us in the depth of our lives and bearing us up this Advent season, bidding us to prepare our lives to live in the fulness of God's justice, mercy and peace. As we hear in the psalm this morning,

"I will listen to what the LORD God is saying, for he is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him.

Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase.

Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.

Thanks be to God for this amazing grace, for the coming of Christ to our lives and thanks be to God's Holy Spirit for bringing us this word of hope today for our lives.

Amen.