

Advent 3 December 17, 2023

Today we invite the children with us to gather at the back table and to make Christmas decorations for the tree and the Church, or even to take the decorations home if you want, during the time for the sermon and prayers. And if you don't particularly want to listen to a sermon, I suppose we can have a very expansive notion of what "children" might mean. Several years ago I was taking a flight on Southwest Airlines, and as the flight attendant made the pre-flight safety announcement, she said, "If we lose cabin pressure during the flight, the oxygen mask will drop down and if you're sitting with a child, or someone who acts like a child, put it on yourself first." As someone being prone to act like a child, I thought that was good advice, so children, adults who act like children, whomever, make some decorations if you want!

Prayer: O God of glory and mercy, today we hear your word and a call to rejoice. Gladden our hearts this day as we continue our Advent pilgrimage that we may await with joy for the coming of our savior. This we ask in the name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

This morning the children helped to start our worship by lighting the candles in the Advent wreath. As is the tradition, we lit the pink candle, for "goadete" Sunday, a day rejoicing in Advent. And of course, that point is driven home forcefully, repeatedly in the lessons from the Scriptures we hear this morning: Isaiah, Mary's song in the Canticle, and Paul all tell us over and over again to rejoice. I think I speak for most of us here when I say, "ok, I get it: rejoice!" But as we gather this morning for the Third Sunday in Advent, I believe that many of us are feeling: what have we got to rejoice about? The terrible war continues in the Holy Land, and yesterday we heard the tragic news that three of the hostages who had managed to free themselves from their captors were then shot by Israeli soldiers, even though the hostages had raised a white flag. Hundreds more Palestinians were killed this week in the warfare, as well as the greatest loss of Israeli troops as well. And there is no ceasefire in sight, despite mounting international calls. But as we know, this is not the only armed conflict either: Sudan and Ukraine continue to take terrible tolls of mounting deaths. And here in our own land, the number of homeless neighbors has reached an all time high, despite the sound economic recovery, which has not been a recovery for all. The days get shorter and darkness looms ever longer. What could possibly be something for us to rejoice about in this time?

I suppose that any Advent season has this underlying contradiction: a time the Church calls us to quiet preparation for the coming of God's

love into the world, but a time always buffeted by the ill winds of bad fortune; violence, chaos and greed never far away. But that call in faith, the call to prepare in Advent, is a call to lift our eyes beyond our current circumstances, a call to open our souls to a further horizon. Thus it has been for our spiritual ancestors and thus it is for us, for you and me, my beloved friends, in Christ now. Two and a half millennia ago, the people of Israel returned from decades of Exile in a foreign land to find Jerusalem in ruins. But in the midst of those ruins, the Spirit of God inspired Isaiah to exclaim a new reality: good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, a proclamation of freedom to the captives, comfort for the mourning, and the promise of a new way, God's justice and peace to take root in their midst and they recovered from the devastation: and in all this, a call to rejoice, to rejoice in the Lord who brings them that promise. For Paul as well, far from home, now on the shores of Greece, navigating his way through out the Roman realm, proclaiming a new king, a new way of life that subverted the divide and conquer of Rome: in this new community Paul seeks, joy, thanksgiving and prayer are at the heart, bring peace and a heartfelt fullness in the assurance that God is present with them, in the midst of all.

Most poignantly, though, is Mary, a young woman, poor, alone and frightened. But the angel has told her, "Do not be afraid." For Mary, there is the most unbelievable good news: she will give birth to the long awaited savior. Glad tidings, yes, but glad tidings that would set anyone's head spinning. But Mary, that daughter of Israel, one raised in the tradition of the prophets, Mary, whose soul is lifted up to see that God's promise is to come, yes and that she is to be a part of this great thing that God is doing, Mary reacts with joy, rejoicing in God, the power of God's love for her and all humanity, bringing God's mercy and goodness to all. For Mary, that horizon of God's saving work lifts her vision and her spirit above the difficulties of her time, lifts her sight from the present day violence and chaos to a future realm of God's goodness. Her faith, her courage to see the love of God through the mists of current misery and pain, her strength to persevere in God's loving way and to open herself to be a part of that way, just extraordinary. Little wonder, little wonder that through the centuries we have turned and returned to her example of faith at the most desperate of times. But even deeper, Mary finds joy in this: her faith at finding God, that word of God's promise, that Good News of God's love and mercy coming into her life, coming into the life of the world, for Mary, despite her circumstances, despite the ill winds that blow, now is the time to rejoice, to give thanks, to see the very power of God's love.

We began our worship this morning with an Advent prayer that is a favorite of mine: "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us..." I very much like that image of God stirring up God's power, that love supreme, that love which knows no bounds, that love abundant and abounding for you and for me. Over and over again, this morning we have prayed and sang, "Come, o come, Emmanuel," God with us. Because we can look, we can cast our eyes of faith to the horizon, we can glimpse with our souls the love of God coming to us, God's mercy enfolding us, Christ's grace sustaining us and the Spirit's inspiration sanctifying us. In our souls, like Mary, we are opened to proclaim the greatness of the Lord and so yes, yes, our spirits also rejoice in God our savior. "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us!" Thanks be to God for this great grace and thanks be to Christ, the one to come to us and make us free. Amen.