

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Isaiah 11:1-10 OT

Romans 15:4-13 NT

Matthew 3:1-11 NT

Preparing the Way (2)

I have to admit that each advent I begin by wondering “What is John the Baptist doing here?” He is not bringing us good news of a baby about to be born. He is not preparing the way for the Christmas story. He is talking about the adult Jesus, not the child in the manger so Why does he appear in advent?

And then I remember as we were reminded last week Jesus is more than a babe in Bethlehem. This little baby in the manger is the one who brings the living good news. God incarnate - Emmanuel - God with us. And so perhaps as we settle into what we have made a gentle story it is worth being reminded by the prophets that Jesus’ life didn’t stop with the arrival of the wise men. As Dirk Lange stated “The vision of the coming kingdom is broad, wide, deep, and generous.”¹ The coming of Jesus is not this soft, gentle, cute little story of a babe in a manger. It’s a story that calls attention to the injustices of the world. Jesus’ life is to wake us up from our numb oblivion.

Last week in our service at the Renaissance we read the poem “Peace on Earth” by Ann Weems. In it she asks “Are there still those who listen for the brush of angel wings, and look for stars above some godforsaken little stable?”

One of those gathered with us asked why God-forsaken little stable? And suddenly we were jarred as we were reminded that this would have been a harsh life event for Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Mary birthed Jesus in a dirty barn, with no mid-wife or family, no sterile conditions, no care...How have we made this a light hearted event?

What if we considered the journey Mary would have been on in the time before the birth. What kind of waiting was she experiencing. The season of Advent makes sense if we are truly preparing for what is to come. This Jesus event is startling, jarring, and potentially life-changing. As Bonhoffer says Advent will not be relevant to us if we do not hunger and thirst for another way. “Advent will not be heard by those who are well-satisfied with their stomachs...but by those who are hungry and thirsty.”² He goes on to say “Advent ... is made clear by two powerful challenges ... Look up, lift your heads! Advent makes people human, new human beings.” John

¹ Lange, Dirk commentary on Romans 15:4-13 - 2nd Advent 2010

² DBW 13:339

calls us to repent. To turn our lives around for the kingdom life. The coming of Jesus should transform our living.

Advent calls us into a new way of living. A way of hope and joy and welcome in the harshest, and darkest of conditions. Advent is a waiting that should fill us with joyful anticipation of a new world, a new way of being together. It is the time when we remember the commitments of our baptisms and professions of faith. And yet repentance and transformation will take time and focus. The advent spiritual practices and preparation is just as important as daily exercise.

What if we considered Christmas Day, “Game Day” the day of the big event. Would you possibly go into a marathon or a hockey game or a bonspiel or any sort of race without any preparation? What if we took this season as seriously as that. What would it do for the health of our souls and spirits and community? What if we actually considered Christmas Day as the day where we live completely into God with us.

I think we would live the story Paul speaks of in Romans. As Lange writes “In this passage, near the end of Romans, Paul begins by actually writing about Scripture and its purpose. This purpose is surprising in itself, given our present-day debates on the nature of Scripture! Paul doesn't write that it provides us with a moral code or a detailed recipe for a prosperous and good life. No, Scripture's primary goal is to create hope in us.”

And interestingly enough the hope we find in scripture is always communal.

Lange goes on to say “The hope that the Holy Spirit creates within me is not simply for my personal good. It is a hope that is shared with others. It is a hope in which I am a part with many others.”

Last weeks scripture told us that hope is found as we love one another. The holy spirit creates harmony and community. But the peace and harmony of the holy spirit is more than just a fun community. It's more than the rotary club, or the dragon boat team. The peace and harmony Jesus brings is given by the Holy Spirit and it is vast and wide. It welcomes the unexpected. It raises that which is dying and transforms it into new life.

The welcome Paul shares is fanatical. He pushes the boundaries of community. There is a reason Jesus arrived as he did, in the little community, born of the lowly in a barn surrounded by animals and angles. Jesus “came to one particular place, was born into one particular race and a unique religious tradition, but it is precisely this particularity on God's part that allows God to be paradoxically present in all people, in all cultures, in all flesh. The incarnation is about the infinite becoming fully embodied in the finite and yet never restricted by that finite. Christ's coming into the world, into the house of David, is God's coming into all of humanity, for all humanity.

This coming, the advent of Christ, can never be claimed as a privilege by one group. Rather, everyone is invited, those who are inside and those who are not, into song!” Paul writes “May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we’ll be a choir—not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus!.”³

Advent prepares us for the coming of the kingdom - a peaceful kingdom that can only be lived into as we believe in the hope of the Gospel. Hope is God’s presence with and for us when we most need God to be there. Peace is created when we live into that hope together, and for one another. If hope and peace are of God that does not mean we wait for God to give it. John the Baptist speaks loud and clear. Repent (metanoia - in Greek) meaning Change your mind and heart. “The peaceable kingdom of God for which we long may require that we put an ax to resentments and biases that are rooted in our hearts. We may have to winnow our greed and overindulgence; we may have to burn the chaff of our impatience. Only then will the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion, the child and the cobra find rest under the widespread branches of a sheltering tree in the peaceable kingdom.”

We may have to prepare our hearts and minds in an intentional way so that we can be aware of the hope, joy, peace and love God brings. I wonder what would it look like for us to be a community singing in the harmony of God’s kingdom? That is the Advent hope we are called to live into.

How then shall we live?

Amen.

³ Romans 15:5-6 (The Message)