

Advent 3B - "The Hard Work of Advent"
The Rev. Jennifer Adams – December 14, 2008

Well this morning, the third Sunday in Advent we have absolutely beautiful readings. I'm going to pull a couple of lines from each one and hold them up just in case you missed any of them. We started with that proclamation from Isaiah that we know also as quoted in Luke: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me," the prophet said, "because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. . . to comfort all who mourn – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. . ." It's an amazing proclamation.

And the psalm, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream." And "Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. . Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy shouldering their sheaves." Nice.

The Epistle "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. . .hold fast to what is good and may the God of peace sanctify you entirely. . ." Almost a benediction, really.

And then John the Baptist who the gospel says "Came to testify to the light. . . He was not the light but he came to testify to the light. . . as one crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

So this third Sunday of Advent we have absolutely beautiful words and visions and people put before us. Proclamations of good news, and freedom and release, tidings of comfort and joy, rejoicing and peace, sanctification and light. It's starting to feel like we're almost there.

But have you watched the news lately? Read the papers? Talked to your neighbors next door or in Muskegon or Detroit or even Washington for that matter? To look around and listen around is to know that many

among us are hurting, or struggling or afraid. Many are searching – for jobs for homes for community for support. And beyond the recent news, lest we forget, we also remain a country at war, within and beyond our borders there are millions who face every day without adequate food and shelter and medical care, and recent acts of terrorism remind us that violence lives and breeds in the world today. And so while it feels like we’re almost there. It feels like we’re not almost there. . .

It’s not the easiest of times. Here at Grace we represent a variety of different life and work situations, but I know from the daily conversations I have with people that this weighs somewhere on all of our hearts. In some ways these days are heavy days, days of anxiety and concern and questions about what any of us can do.

But I actually think that all of this is what Advent is all about. John the Baptist wasn’t sitting in the easiest of positions either. He spent most of his days in the wilderness knee deep in the muck of the Jordan River surrounded by people and inviting people who were searching or hurting or struggling or afraid. And he sprinkled them or he dunked them and he said to them from the depth of his heart, “The light is coming.” Isaiah was in a similar situation -- Just a couple of chapters earlier the prophet was listing the injustices and the hungers and the wanderings of his people, and crying out about the mess of it all. And then it was into the mess that he proclaimed, “The Spirit is upon me to bring good news to the oppressed.” And even Paul wrote his letter during a time of persecution when Christians’ reality was one of daily risking their lives simply in order to gather -- and yet Paul described the character of that community as one of peace as one of confidence, mutual love and joy.

So it was never outside of the struggle that Advent happened. In fact, maybe it’s because of the struggle that Advent is here at all. This season tells us that God has heard the cries of the people, heard them then and now and at every time in-between. And so it’s into the real world that Advent comes and Christmas comes too. Into all of it comes the Christ—into the pain, the struggle, the searching, the cruelty, the neglect – into

the promise of light, as the presence of joy and the light of the world comes our God.

And so the invitation to us this season is to be present to the many varied realities of our days and present to the promise too. To stand knee deep in whatever muck we find ourselves, or to stand with our neighbors who are hurting and to say with John from the bottom our hearts, “The light is coming.” And here’s the miracle -- in our presence a bit of light will come to them now. It is our work to list the injustices of our time and then to proclaim, “We have been anointed to bring good news to the oppressed,” and part of the miracle is that through works of justice we can be that good news in the world. It is our work to name persecutions, to stand with those who suffer and (no matter what’s going on out there) to be a community of mutual love and peace and confidence and joy.

This means that Advent is hard work. But it’s good work. It’s blessed work. It’s sanctifying, life-giving, hope-building work. And it means that while we are present to the struggles we are also participating in the coming of Christ into the places and among the people who need it most. It means that this season we have been invited to become the voice of those crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord. The light is coming and will soon be.”