



“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time, I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jer. 33: 14-15).

Isn't this what all of us want? We want to live in a time and place where we are joined together and we live in right relationship with each other. We want justice, peace, mercy and grace. To get to that kind of world, we need faith. Faith in God, faith in each other.

Even with the world around us descending into one tragedy after another- two weeks ago Paris and Beirut, last week Mali, two days ago Colorado Springs - we are called to step into the unknown in faith. Craig Kallio, Rector at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Oak Ridge TN, says that:

faith is an ongoing search for meaning. It is not an accomplishment, but a gift. ... We are here today not because of our accumulation of knowledge, but because, in part, God has drawn us here. ... Faith is being in conversation with God.<sup>1</sup>

We start a new liturgical year today- Year C. We will read from the Gospel of Luke most every Sunday from now through November 20, 2016. One of the characteristics of Luke is an emphasis upon God's work in human history. Luke's God is not removed from our daily lives. Similarly, we are not able to disconnect from God's call to us. Luke also highlights for us how Jesus was a part of a society that had conflicts galore. The land of Palestine was a Roman territory with all the conflicts that go along with an occupying army. The Jewish people were in disarray amongst themselves, with all the conflicts that arise when people of one nation do not agree. Just like today in so many ways. We can learn from those times how we might act in these times.

Richard Rohr has written that

We will not trust spiritual power until we have experienced a God who ... is willing to wait, allow, forgive, trust and love unconditionally. It is largely a waste of time to tell people to love generously when the God they have been presented with is a taskmaster, loves quite conditionally, is easily offended, very needy and threatens people with eternal torture if they do not believe in him.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Dr. Craig Kallio, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Oak Ridge, TN. "The Anatomy of Emptiness", in *The Anglican Digest*, Winter 2009, pps. 7-10.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr. *Things Hidden*, 89.

One of the wonderful learnings from Education for Ministry and our Basics classes is the opportunity to think through and discuss what our understandings about God are. Many of us were raised in faith traditions where God is the judge, just waiting to smite us for the smallest fault. A God we will avoid if possible. Some of us were raised in traditions where God is love, justice and mercy. Our challenge is to reconcile that view of God with what we see on the nightly news. We can each learn from each other as we strive to mature into a faith that makes sense. Reading the Bible is never dull if you are willing to be in conversation with others and with God.

One could reasonably expect that since today is the first Sunday in Year C, the Gospel according to Luke, that we would start with Chapter 1, verse 1. And so let's consider the prologue to the Gospel according to Luke:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed (Luke 1: 1-4).

In other words, you can believe that what is written is true because I have investigated the claims made by those who were there, who saw Jesus heal, teach, die, rise again. This is truth- that which helps to form our lives to become lives worth living, centered in God and right relationship.

Advent, from the Greek, means waiting, expectation, yearning. That is what we are doing, even as we may not know in full what it is we are waiting and yearning for. At the time Luke was written, around the year 80CE, the hope that Jesus would come again in glory any day was likely beginning to fade. It was best, then, to figure out how to live with an uncertain return date. To figure out a structure for life that was good for the long haul, if you will. Advent traditionally has been a "both/and" – a celebration of the first coming of the Christ Child at Christmas and also a looking forward to the second coming- the second Advent.

The words from Jesus in Chapter 21 of Luke that are appointed for this First Sunday of Advent are not what we expect. They are not ones that immediately come to mind if someone asks us about Jesus. I'm much more used to rattling off the Beatitudes, or something about one of the healing or feeding miracles, or maybe even Jesus cleansing the Temple. But Jesus talking about the end times? And talking about an apocalypse with signs from sun, moon and stars? No, that's not even on the radar screen in the list of the best known teachings of Jesus, at least for me.

We need to be reminded from time to time that true faith is much more complex than simple platitudes. Faith is not just for the easy times when we seem to be in control of our life. Faith is being in conversation with God most especially at the end times, either literally or figuratively, and those times when life is chaos or simply incredibly uncertain. Faith is, in part, finding gratitude when everything around us seems to be in chaos.

The New Zealand Prayer Book has a Liturgy entitled "Thanksgiving for Creation and Redemption." The opening acclamation is:

Grace to you and peace  
 From God our Creator,  
 The love at our beginning  
 And without end  
 In our midst and with us.

And the people respond  
 God is with us  
 Here we find new life.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus commands us to “be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.” It is easy for us to be worried about this life. Especially when things do not go as planned. When what we hoped and dreamed for isn’t the reality we face. Or as someone said to me “this isn’t the retirement we had in mind” after her husband’s health deteriorated and they were not able to travel around the world, which is what they had planned and saved for during their working years. Life often is, indeed, unfair or unexpected.

The good news is that “redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28). New life through faith in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, the redeemer of the world. We are redeemed today if we will put our faith in Jesus, our Lord and Savior and if we will have the faith of Jesus as so eloquently revealed in the Gospels. Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture. The birth story of Jesus in Luke is the one which includes the angels repeatedly telling various people “do not be afraid” and reminds Mary that with God nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). And Mary responds as each of us is called to respond: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord” (1:38). Mary knows that God is with us and through God we find new life. Mary is grateful even as she faces the unknown. Gratitude is essential if we are to successfully navigate the rough hard places.

The Collect this morning asks God to give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light. The armor of light is the new life when God is with us. We are reminded that God is our light as we lit the first candle in the Advent wreath today. Even as we light the first candle, we see that three more remain. We wait through these next 3 Sundays for those candles to be lit as well. Our lives might be compared to the Advent wreath. As we grow in knowledge and faith, as we seek meaning through our relationship with God, more and more light exists. Let us be grateful for the light of the world which pushes away the darkness.

Share God’s love by finding something to be grateful for today. The exercise that I hope you followed during pledge season was to write down something you were thankful for each day on the sticky pad. Science has shown, again and again, that when we can focus upon the positives in our lives, we are more likely to be happy. And when we are happy, we are more likely to be healthy. We used to think that if we were healthy, we could be happy. It turns out that the reverse is true- more often than not, being happy helps with being healthy.

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<sup>3</sup> A New Zealand Prayer Book (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 456.

Jesus uses the example of the fig tree to remind us that there is a rhyme and reason to our lives. We can know summer is not far behind when we see the buds on the fig tree. We can hope when we see life coming again despite a harsh winter. We can almost taste the ripe sweet fruit as we await the season when the fruit is ready to be picked and eaten, sustaining us,

Remember the people's response to the Thanksgiving for Creation and Redemption:

“God is with us. Here we find new life.”

Be grateful and find peace in knowing that God is with us. Candles are lit, both literally in the wreath as we progress through the season of Advent, and figuratively as we continue in relationship with God. Through faith in Jesus Christ, find new life. Find strength and courage to face the day. See that our paths are made easier for that light.

*Amen.*