

“A Prophet’s Proclamation”

December 14, 2014

Christ Comes series – 3rd Sunday in Advent

The word “Advent” literally “coming toward.” And if we consider what this season is supposed to be for us, then yes, it’s a time when we realize again that God is “coming toward” us in the birth of Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel. Advent is also a time when we remind ourselves that the Kingdom of God is always coming, and Christ will come again.

So, what do we do? How do we live when we know that Jesus came to be the Savior of the world, and yet, we wait for him to return?

We hear the phrase “Keep Christ in Christmas” this time every year. Whether it’s a reaction to consumerism or getting more for ourselves, we’re challenged, but to what? What does it mean to “keep Christ in Christmas?” This year, I saw a Facebook post that read: “Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive the guilty, welcome the stranger and the unwanted child, care for the ill, love your enemies.” When you put details on “keeping Christ in Christmas,” then we have to stop and decide if that’s what we want. Do we really want Christmas to be different? Will our preparation include the call to care for others deeply?

It seems that Isaiah had such a powerful word for the Israelites. Already he’s challenged them to return to God, to trust God, and to hear God more clearly. He’s used images like God as Potter and us as clay, God as Shepherd and we as sheep. Isaiah was a prophet in some of the most difficult times for Israel, and his words to the people are some of the most powerful. Today, we hear words of hope that come to Isaiah in the midst of God’s people who are settling in Jerusalem again after the exile in Babylon.

It was difficult to re-adjust to being back after so many years away. It’s hard to get the people gelled into a new community. They’ve lost energy for rebuilding the cities and the temple and setting up life again. Perhaps they felt that God had abandoned them – that God had forgotten about the covenant, that they had been so bad that God had written them off. It was a time with not much “good news,” and yet God offers hope in a promise of one who will come to bring comfort to God’s people.

Now, when we read this prophecy, it might sound familiar. If you turn to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 4, Jesus tells the people in the Temple that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. 500 years after Isaiah's prophecy, Jesus is in Nazareth preaching his first sermon "at home." He unrolls the scroll of Isaiah and reads part of this chapter. He tells the people his mission: to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. He claims his calling. He is the One they have waited for – the Messiah.

Do you know what happens next? Jesus is run out of town. His mission isn't what the people expected the Messiah to do. They wanted victory, but Jesus proclaims love and forgiveness, deliverance from sin and restoration to new life. For our Christian community, Jesus is the Suffering Servant whom Isaiah talks about – the One God promises will redeem the whole world.

The Spirit has a key role here. Because God's servant is anointed by the Spirit, the servant reaches out to others. The Spirit of God overpowers our human will. Despite the circumstances we face, God is God. God will bring to pass God's promises. The people of Isaiah's time had to trust that God would be faithful.

And consider the power of the Holy Spirit. We wouldn't be here if it weren't for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit draws us to be in worship. The Spirit draws us to serve in ministry. Would you be doing what you're doing in ministry had God not overpowered your caution and fear, your apathy, your reluctance, and called you into something new?

Just think about what God is doing here in this place: kids gathered yesterday both to share the Good News of Jesus and to hear it, men and women gathered for prayer, youth raised money to be able to serve others, worship is planned so that it is meaningful and memorable, people serve at MAP so that others have what they need, musicians and singers who share their gifts, foster parents have a place to come to receive clothes for kids who will be with them. And that's a short list!

It's happening because the Spirit of God took hold and inspired people. God gives strength and gifts for leadership. God's promise in Isaiah is that the hard work of faith, of reaching out to those who need to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, will be possible because God is involved.

We don't do this alone – God is here. The prophet's message is meant to be heard and understood by the people so that they will act for God. God will restore

Israel through their efforts. We might watch the news and wonder what's going on. We might wring our hands and shake our heads, but we need to hear God's voice, too! We're the ones to reverse devastation and work for renewal. To keep Christ in Christmas means to hear Isaiah's word - that this is God's mission, and we're a part of it!

The good news that Isaiah brings is for the most needy – the oppressed, brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, and mourners. I'd say that list covers most of us – we've been there at one time or another. Hurting people matter to God. What great news that God cares! But that wasn't the end. Isaiah also told the people to quit focusing on the past so much and rather look to the future. The Israelites were supposed to share the grace of God.

The year of the Lord's favor is a promise that God will restore the hopes and dreams of God's people. Listen to what God will give the people: a crown for ashes, gladness for mourning, praise for despair. What a trade off! God will make them "oaks of righteousness" – stable and strong. They will be joyful. God delivers us from sin and restores us to new life. God will give us what is needed to rebuild, heal, and comfort. And the world will know God who saves because God's people will give God glory.

Advent is a time when we focus on the birth of Jesus Christ. But the prophet Isaiah reminds us that Jesus' birth is one part of the whole story. The Messiah, the Suffering Servant, comes on a mission from God. The servant's work is never done. Jesus' mission and ministry is ours, too. Even if we don't know when he'll be coming back, it's not an excuse to ignore his mission. He tells us why we're sent into the world: to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. It's our calling as Christians, and we need to hear it again.

I've thought of college students this past week as they've endured exams, and one writer says that our life of faith is much like cramming for exams. It doesn't matter how well or not well we did throughout the term. When it comes to the final, we drop everything and focus because now it's important. And so it is with our faith. We don't know how much time we have on this earth. We don't know how much time we have until Jesus comes back. But we have time. So our call is to live faithfully now.

Maybe you saw that Time magazine named “Ebola fighters” as the person of the year for 2014. What a statement about the work of those who are “on the ground” doing the work of healing and helping. And we celebrate that many of them are serving in the name of Jesus Christ!

Friends, Advent is a time when our faith gets personal. It’s that idea of God coming toward us, perhaps, that makes us realize just how personal this is. God calls us. God who created us even calls us to believe in God’s power and promise – even now! Even in the midst of uncertainty in our lives and in the world. Even now, God is at work!

Philip Yancey says, “You cannot go wrong personalizing God. God is not a blurry power living somewhere in the sky...God is "personal." God enters into people's lives, messes with families, shows up in unexpected places, chooses unlikely leaders, calls people to account. Most of all, God loves.”

Isaiah says that our mission is about being anointed – sent out in the name of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to bring good news, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim God’s hope for the world, to comfort, to heal. Isaiah’s prophecy is God’s vision expressed in action – that’s why Jesus uses it to describe his mission. That’s the message we have to proclaim. The Spirit helps us do what God calls us to do. The question for us is this: do we want to see God’s vision accomplished? Will we live what the prophet proclaims? Will we live Jesus’ call with joy for what God is doing?

Thanks be to God. AMEN.