**Sign of Things to Come (12/1/2024)**

First Sunday of Advent

**VIOLET**

**Luke 21:25-36**

The stone cathedral was dim and dank, with only a few souls scattered among the pews softly singing the hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

With the last note wafting in the air, a candle was lit in a circle of evergreen — the Advent wreath. It was the only sign of the season in the sanctuary. There were no pine boughs strewn from the balcony nor poinsettias gracing the windowsills. They would come later.

For now, it was just the flickering flame of a lone candle urging on a weary world to rejoice.

It was the beginning of Advent, the four-weeks leading to Christmastide. A time for quiet reflection, patient waiting and expectant watching.

But beyond the cathedral’s doors, Christmas joy in full swing with crowds swarming an open-air market — lights twinkling and speakers blaring songs about chestnuts roasting over open fires.

Yes, tis the season — of missing Advent’s message that before celebrating what God has done for us through Jesus, we must first be still. We must watch for the signs of God’s realm drawing near, signs that can be easily missed amid the traditional trappings of Christmas which appear earlier each year.

Now it’s understandable why Advent quickly morphs into Christmas. We are a people who find it hard to wait, and we certainly don’t want to be walking in darkness. We want immediate gratification and light — lots of it.

Another reason Advent doesn’t get the attention it deserves is that it clashes with our cultural expectations of the holidays with scripture readings that are more apocalyptic than jolly. Luke’s gospel is the perfect example of this, as we hear about the signs that will appear in the sun, moon and stars when the Son of Man returns.

Advent, which comes from the Latin word *adventus* means “coming.”And so, we are not just celebrating Jesus’ first coming as the Babe of Bethlehem, but we are anticipating his return as well.

What are the signs to look for today?

Perhaps beyond the artificial holiday lights we might see a sign of God’s true light shining in our communities. Perhaps, if we looked into the eyes of the homeless, the disabled, and the stranger, we would see the sign that God is right in front of us.

Perhaps, if we entered a quiet sacred space this Advent, where the only light burning is that of the first candle around the Advent wreath, we would see the sign that there really is a light in which no darkness can overcome.

*God of Advent waiting and hoping, we pray that You open our eyes to the many signs of a weary world being redeemed. May we remain alert to the very things that matter the most to You. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Make Ready (12/8/2024)**

Second Sunday of Advent

**VIOLET**

**Luke 3:1-6**

Advent just wouldn’t be Advent without John the Baptist emerging from the wilderness with the urgent message for all to repent. Now to our modern ears “repent” might conjure images of a street preacher shouting at passers-by. But let’s not go there. Rather, hear the word “repent” as it is meant to be heard, as a call to turn back to God.

Yes, John leaves his wandering monastic existence to give us this public service announcement to get back to what really matters — loving as God loves and creating a world where that love is extended to all. John even helps us find our way back to God by giving us a list of things to do.

Another list is probably the last thing we need right now, especially as our Christmas to-do’s grow longer each day. There are gifts to buy. Presents to wrap. Cookies to bake. Trees to trim. And, if you are one of the rare saints that still writes Christmas cards rather than sending an e-greeting, then there are cards to address and stamps to lick.

John, though, wants us to make ready for Christmas in ways we might never have thought of before. Echoing the very words of the prophet Isaiah, John invites us to prepare the way for the Lord by adding the following to our holiday lists:

**Fill in every valley.**

*What can we do to reach those who are low and full despair? How can the valleys of poverty of body, mind and soul be filled by us?*

**Make low the mountains and hills.**

*What looming mountain or hill of injustice can be lowered so that the playing field for all is finally level?*

**Straighten crooked roads.**

*In what way is God asking us to find the courage to speak truth to lies?*

**Smooth the rough places.**

*What are the rough places in our own lives that need smoothing out? Does a callus heart need to soften? Does a short temper need more patience?*

It is interesting to note that John’s appearance in Luke’s gospel starts with an introduction of the rulers and religious authorities who were in power during his life, reminding us that often earthly rulers have their own agendas.

It is only through our hands and hearts that God’s beloved community becomes a reality.

After all, if we don’t prepare the way for the Lord by filling in valleys, lowering mountains and making smooth rough places, then who will?

*Loving God, may our lists of things to do include more than just holiday busy work. May our lists reflect our commitment in creating beloved communities that point to Your glory, now and forever. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Look Forward (12/15/2024)**

Third Sunday of Advent

**VIOLET**

**Luke 3:7-18**

There was a cartoon a few years ago making the social media rounds of John the Baptist, arms flailing in anger, pointing to some religious bigwigs. In the picture were also snakes slithering away. The text read, “Happy Advent! You brood of vipers.”

While we might chuckle at first, beneath the brevity is a sobering message. John is calling out the corruption that’s often lurking behind seemingly good deeds.

In John’s case, he is angry with the hypocrisy of the religious elite. They claim to be righteous, but they are just a brood of vipers — snakes slithering away so as not to get consumed by fire. In the agriculture society of the time, people would have been familiar with this image, as snakes would flee for safety when the stubble in fields was burned to prepare for a new planting.

While we might not have witnessed snakes escaping the burning stubble in fields, we have seen — or know of — people who have turned their backs on organized religion because words and actions didn’t match up.

During the holidays, especially, we hear stories of scams claiming to help others when really the money donated lines a pocket that doesn’t need lining. Vipers are out there, but so are obedient sheep.

Take for instance a logger in a rural community who, upon hearing of a severe shortfall in the village’s community fuel fund, took it upon himself to give away wood — his bread and butter — to help others heat their homes. The logger, who didn’t belong to any church, helped many people survive that winter.

Yes, there will always be a brood of vipers in this world, but may we be the ones this Advent season who listen to John, giving away a coat and sharing food with those in need.

Look around your community and begin asking what are the unmet needs? And may you find it in your heart to give like that logger who gave from what little he had himself.

*Gracious God, as we draw closer to Christmas, may we realize that we have more than enough and plenty to share with Your children who hunger, thirst and are naked. Release our grips on all that we cling to tightly. Increase our trust that with You, our daily bread will always be sufficient. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Moving with Mary’s Song (12/22/2024)**

Fourth Sunday of Advent

**VIOLET**

Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

A bit of trivia on this the fourth Sunday of Advent. What’s one of the earliest Advent hymns ever to be recorded? (Hint: It’s found in today’s reading from Luke.)

It’s Mary’s song of praise, also known as The Magnificat, which is Latin for “my soul magnifies the Lord.”

Mary, the teen betrothed to Joseph, whose life has been turned upside down when an angel tells her she has found favor with God and will bear a son, goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Elizabeth is also with child, carrying the wilderness wandering baptizer, John.

When the two women meet, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps with joy and she says to Mary, “Blessed are you among women!”

Such a greeting would lead any person to break out in song — as Mary does. But her words are not the maternal sentiments one might expect. Rather, 20th century German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis for his role in speaking out against Hitler, described Mary’s song as, “the most passionate, the wildest, most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung.”

This is no meek and mild Mary cast in the glow of heavenly light that we see on Christmas cards. This, says Bonhoffer, is “the passionate and enthusiastic Mary who speaks out there.”

Mary’s song reminds us just what Christmas — this Christ moment — is all about. She sings of God who fills the hungry with good things. She sings of God who sends the rich away empty. She sings to the One who lifts the lowly — to the One who does great things through people like her who are often deemed unworthy.

Sadly, we live in a world where the lowly still get pushed to the side, silenced and ignored. But as Advent comes to an end — and soon we will be singing about holy and silent nights — can we take a moment once again to listen to Mary’s song, believing how God is still doing great things for many Marys — and Toms, Rauls, Juans, Anitas, and you.

Yes, YOU. For God is wanting to use your life as well in making this world a better place for all.

The Magnificat is not filled with fa la las. It is a “hard, strong song,” says Bonhoeffer, one which “tells of the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.”

And that is exactly why Mary sings it for us this day.

*Amazing God, who works through us all, may this day we move with Mary’s song, tapping our feet, snapping our fingers, and singing praises of how You are indeed doing great things among us. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Who is This Child? (12/29/2024)**

First Sunday after Christmas

WHITE

Luke 2:45-52

Jesus was missing. Mary and Joseph were present. So were the shepherds and their sheep. Even the angel took its place in the nativity scene. But no Jesus figurine. The young mother searched the house many times, but to no avail. Was the new puppy to blame? Or did the figurine get placed in the box marked “ornaments” rather than the one that read “nativity”?

The mother eventually gave up looking.

Then, while taking down the Christmas decorations, the box marked “nativity” fell over. There on the floor was the Jesus figurine, tangled in a clump of straw used to adorn the nativity scene. He was exactly where he was supposed to be all along.

While technically Christmastide doesn’t end till Jan. 6 with the celebration of Epiphany, many of the festive trimmings are being packed away and, with them, many a baby Jesus figurine.

But how do we keep Christmas in our hearts long after the decorations are gone? Will we remember who this child is for us come spring or summer?

It might feel jarring to go from infant Jesus to 12-year-old Jesus in a week, but today’s reading from Luke does just that, bringing us to the temple where a precocious preteen is discussing matters of faith with religious leaders.

Jesus’ parents find him there after a three-day search upon discovering their son was not in the group that they were travelling with from Jerusalem back to their home in Nazareth.

Mary’s agitation is not helped when Jesus says to her, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I would be in my Father’s house?”

Good question, Jesus.

Didn’t Mary remember that holy night of your birth 12 years ago? It was a night the angels sang, and shepherds left their flocks to adore you. Did the challenges and stresses of parenting make her forget?

Will being back to the challenges and stresses of life after the holidays are packed away deaden our senses to the Holy One?

As Christmas becomes a distant memory will we have a Mary moment — or two — forgetting who this child is? And if we find ourselves searching for Jesus, will we know to look in our hearts first. For he is always there, waiting for us to find him.

*God of Christmas promises, we praise You for the greatest gift we could ever receive, Your Son Jesus. As we make our way into a new year, help us to keep the words of the old hymn in our hearts, the words that remind us that “this, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing.” In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*