

Sunday, December 13, 2020

Third Sunday of Advent, Year B

Introduction

"Rejoice always," begins the reading from 1 Thessalonians. Isaiah and the psalmist make clear that God is turning our mourning into laughter and shouts of joy. "All God's children got a robe," go the words of a spiritual. It is not so much a stately, formal, pressed outfit as it is a set of party clothes, clothes we are happy to wear. We receive that robe in baptism, and in worship we gather for a foretaste of God's party.

Prayer of the Day (Advent Readers)

Stir up the wills of your faithful people, Lord God, and open our ears to the words of your prophets, that, anointed by your Spirit, we may testify to your light; through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Though the people had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, they continued to face hardship and oppression. In the language of the jubilee year described in Leviticus 25, the prophet, moved by the spirit of God, announces deliverance for those who are oppressed and comfort for those who mourn.

¹The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;

²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

³to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

⁸For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

⁹Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;

all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

John's gospel describes Jesus as the "light of the world." John the Baptist is presented as a witness to Jesus, one who directs attention away from himself to Christ, the true light.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"
as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why then are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising.

Sermon

Prophets

Throughout the ages people have been called to speak to others on God's behalf, but the timing is usually "off"

God only knows who was first called to be a prophet.

How about someone at the birth of the human species,
as ape-like creatures learned to walk, think, and talk?

Or to a primitive woman or man twenty thousand years ago,
when the glaciers retreated from North America and Europe?

Or to an ancient ancestor living in the delta between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers,
four or five thousand years ago,
in a region that is often called the cradle of civilisation?

It's hard to say who might have heard God first.

As we in the Judea-Christian tradition tell the story
it might have been Adam and Eve,
or Noah,
or a man named Abram and his wife Sarai,
who moved from Ur and Haran
and accepted the invitation to claim Palestine as the homeland for a nomadic people.

Ever since the expulsion from Eden
God seemed to our ancestors as far away as the heavens.

But from time to time the deity got a message to the people of this planet:

You are not alone.

There's something or someone bigger than you are.

I make sense of your life, even when you can't.

My love empowers you to love.

Which is all very well and good
unless you're the one who's heard from God,
and is asked to pass a message along to others.

Noah's neighbours laughed at him,
as he built the ark and gathered animals.

Moses was often caught in the crossfire
between what God gave and what his people complained about.

Isaiah delivered warnings from God when the nation enjoyed peace and prosperity,
and offered words of hope when all seemed to have been lost.

And John was called from the wilderness
to baptise people from the city;
to wash away sin from those who refused to believe that they were sinners.

The timing was all "off."

Those who had not heard God directly doubted the prophets;
ridiculing and even killing them.

It was a thankless job, and a lonely life.

Perhaps because God's way is not our natural, human way.

When life is good we forget about God,
and when life is bad we doubt that God can help.

Jeremiah is one of the prophets who dreamed of a different future;
God's Law written on every human heart.

No longer just a handful of people hearing God,
and speaking on God's behalf,
but a more generous outpouring of the Spirit.

Which brings us to Jesus;
the one we welcome as an infant
who hears and knows God.

And becomes God's voice;
Word.

True light.

John declares his coming,
as he cleanses those who come to him at the Jordan.

He butts heads with religious and political leaders,
who resist any challenge to their authority.

The Baptist is eventually arrested for his behaviour,
especially for calling Herod Antipas out for his flagrant violation of Jewish matrimonial law.

He ends up in prison.

And then with his head on a platter.

Wondering, along the way, whether Jesus was the one he had been sent to welcome.

Whether his gentle, forgiving manner was really what God had in mind:
healing "dirty" lepers,
eating with tax collectors,
befriending prostitutes,
caring for Samaritans and gentiles,
forgiving Roman soldiers.

John was a prophet,
with a part to play, a word to share,
but he did not see the whole picture.

And he knew it.

He knew that his was a lesser role,
as Jesus began his public ministry,
as more than a prophet –
God in the flesh.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

P God of power and might, shine your radiance and come quickly to this weary world. Hear our prayers for everyone in need.

A brief silence.

A God of every living creature, you announce the year of your favour for all of creation. Extend your kindness and relief to endangered animals and plants. Comfort people who rely on the rhythms of nature to make their living. Hear us, O God.

C **Your mercy is great.**

A God of preachers and messengers, you have entrusted your church with the work of proclaiming good news. Strengthen the witness of bishops, pastors, deacons, church musicians, lay leaders, and all people who contribute their prayers and talents to public worship here and at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. Embed your word in their hearts. Hear us, O God.

C **Your mercy is great.**

A God of all peoples and nations, you plant us as your oaks of righteousness and ask us to care for one another. Be present with the leaders of every nation as they govern. Give them a spirit of righteousness, that your goodness and mercy is revealed through their actions. Hear us, O God.

C **Your mercy is great.**

A God of exiles and wanderers, you repair what was once destroyed. We pray for people who have been displaced from their homes by fire, flood, earthquake, or storm. Support the work of Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Disaster Response, and all disaster relief organisations in their recovery efforts. Hear us, O God.

C **Your mercy is great.**

A God of the ill and injured, come to the aid of those who are tired, isolated and discouraged. Renew all who serve in the healing professions. Heal those who have contracted COVID-19, and these for whom we pray by name... Hear us, O God.

C **Your mercy is great.**

A God of sinners and saints, you offer joy even in the midst of our grief. We are grateful for the beloved, imperfect people whose lives testified to your radiant love. Anoint all who mourn with the oil of gladness. Hear us, O God.

C **Your mercy is great.**

P Draw near to us, O God, and receive our prayers for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

C **Amen.**

Offering Prayer

A Generous God,
you have created all that is,
and you provide for us in every season.
Bless all that we offer,
that through these gifts the world will receive your blessing.
In the name of Jesus, Emmanuel, we pray.

C Amen.

Blessing

P The Creator of the stars bless your Advent waiting,
the long-expected Saviour fill you with love,
the unexpected Spirit guide your journey,
✠ now and forever.

C Amen.

Dismissal

A Go in peace. Prepare the way of the Lord.

C **Thanks be to God.**