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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Year A/Advent 3/Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11, Canticle 15

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

On this third Sunday of Advent it's probably time to reorient ourselves a little. A short two weeks ago we were ushering in this season of "waiting" and "watching" for the "coming" or "returning" of Christ, and beginning again to name the themes of Advent with the lighting of the candles on our wreath, those themes being Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. The third candle is now lit, and today is Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of rejoicing, celebrating Joy. The rose candle signifies to us that it's time to lighten up a little. If we see Advent as a penitential season, it's time to let go a bit and reflect more on the joy that is to come—the joy of experiencing again the strange and unexpected fulfillment of God's promise through the birth of a little baby in a barn on a cold night "in the bleak mid-winter" in Bethlehem.

Advent 3 has also traditionally been called "Stir Up Sunday"—taken from the words of the Collect for today—"Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us." If we are taking these words at literal face value, and if we are being honest with ourselves, we might be having feelings of ambivalence as they are read. We would truly like to say, "Yes! Come on!" but we may actually be thinking something like, "Whoa! Wait just a minute! I'm not so sure what this "coming with power and might" will mean! I'm not sure I'm ready to live a different way or take a different path, and it all sounds really risky—and probably demanding in ways we cannot even imagine."

Years ago, I had some posters on the walls in my psychotherapy office. One of them was a picture of a beautiful nature scene—the ocean, a beach and birds, as I recall—and, at the bottom, a quotation that felt especially powerful to me. “Happy are those who dream dreams and are ready to pay the price to make them come true.” I think Isaiah would like that quotation. He has been speaking many words of woe—pronouncing condemnation on God’s earthly enemies—corrupt rulers, unfaithful people who keep turning to the worship of other gods. And now, he bursts forth into the description of a magnificent vision—a magnificent dream. He’s describing what the kingdom of God is like—how things are supposed to be—how things ultimately will be. The drought is over. Creation is blossoming forth in abundance. The blind, the deaf, the mute, and the handicapped are all healed. There is a bountiful supply of water. There is a highway for God’s people that is so perfect that no one will ever be lost on it. There is no danger. The homeless return home. All is joy and gladness. These are words that describe a powerful dream—a dream of the kingdom—a dream we too often forget. We get so attached to things as they are that we forget that God’s vision is far different from our reality.

Today’s lectionary readings are bent on making sure that we get the message of Advent that all is due for a change. God comes—and the order of the day becomes the disorder—the shifting of priorities. Our Canticle—in a modern translation--reiterates Mary’s vision when she is telling her cousin Elizabeth about the child she is carrying—“The world is about to turn.”

Jesus knows Isaiah’s description and he knows that he is living out his mother’s vision. Our reading from Matthew describes a dramatic interaction. Here is John the Baptist—the great prophet—who has perhaps known Jesus all his life—after all, their mothers are related. Here is John the Baptist—the great wilderness preacher who has apparently heard his calling loudly and

clearly and has spent a significant period of his life passionately preparing the way for the Messiah. Here is the one who recognizes Jesus when Jesus approaches him and requests to be baptized—the one who we assume has witnessed the opening of the heavens and has heard the voice of God proclaiming Jesus to be “the Son, the beloved.” He has every reason to know who Jesus is. But now he is languishing in prison, put there by King Herod because he has dared to criticize the king. John is looking into the abyss, and it sounds like he could be having a crisis of faith. Maybe Jesus isn’t preaching the gospel that John has expected him to preach or wanted him to preach. And so he sends his disciples to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” We can imagine what John is thinking. “What if I’ve given my life to this path and now find out that I’ve been wrong?”

Some of us may have been where John is in this reading. Maybe not in prison, but, when things get bad enough we sometimes wonder about the one in whom we have put our faith. Is Jesus for real, or should we—like our Jewish brothers and sisters--still be waiting for the Messiah? If Jesus is for real, why is it taking so long for the kingdom to come? Why are the hungry still hungry? Why do we not have peace on earth? Should we be trying to understand life from another perspective—with a different philosophy—a different theology? What if this whole Christianity thing is nothing more than a massive hoax? Surely if there is a loving and powerful God, there would not be so much destruction and suffering around us.

In his usual indirect way, Jesus does not exactly answer John’s question. He doesn’t say, “Oh, yes, I’m the one.” He says to John’s disciples—“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are

raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” “See for yourself. Gather your evidence and tell John about it.”

The Kingdom of God is a vision that we are each called to see and to hear and to proclaim. It is a vision that we are called to create. It is God’s dream for creation, and we are invited to dream that dream with God and to be willing to pay the price to make it come true. The Kingdom of God springs forth in our midst every time love conquers hate—every time unity overcomes separation—every time forgiveness and reconciliation replace revenge and retribution. The Kingdom of God springs forth whenever the good of all triumphs over the narrow self-interest of the few—whenever advances are made in making sure that everyone has enough—enough food, adequate shelter, adequate health care, and clean water to drink. It happened—at least temporarily—at Standing Rock Sioux Reservation just this week. The Kingdom of God springs forth whenever justice is served and mercy and compassion prevail.

Three years ago, when we last read today’s readings, many of us had been watching the joyous celebration of the life of Nelson Mandela—who had just died. Here was a man who showed us what the human spirit is enabled, by the grace of God, to accomplish—what it looks like to transcend the artificial boundaries that we place on ourselves when we say that we are “only human.”

In his book No Future without Forgiveness, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes:

“Nelson Mandela emerged from prison not spewing words of hatred and revenge. He amazed us all by his heroic embodiment of reconciliation and forgiveness... Those twenty-seven years and all the suffering they entailed were the fires of the furnace that tempered his steel, that removed the dross. Perhaps without that suffering he would have been less able to be as

compassionate and as magnanimous as he turned out to be. And that suffering on behalf of others gave him an authority and credibility that can be provided by nothing else in quite the same way.” (39)

Nelson Mandela was able to do what he did because he had come to know something about the Kingdom of God. He saw and heard and proclaimed and created. He would not have been able to choose that path by simply depending on his own resources. God’s dream is not a dream any of us create alone. Today we are given the opportunity to affirm that God is with us and in us as we participate in the Eucharist. When we consume the body and blood of Christ we are opening ourselves up to receive God’s transforming power—to be changed and to live beyond our own limits. We are claiming our identification with the one who was able and who continues to be able to accomplish in us far more than we can ask or imagine.

“Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.” Amen.