

Rev. Robert Wollenburg
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New NY
The Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2011
Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8

HAPPY ADVENT

Please pray with me.

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

With all the conflict and darkness in our lives, this prayer could keep our hands folded and heads bowed for a very long time. Wars great and small continue. Our political leaders are in conflict. Economic issues, globally and personally, leave us in the dark. The plight of millions living in poverty weighs heavily on every good Christian conscience, and leaves us conflicted and in the dark about what to do.

“By his coming, O Lord, give us strength and shed light on our path,” we pray.

The Advent color is blue. It is a reminder of hope. It may also be a reminder of depressed moods and real conditions in which we live.

“Stir up our hearts, O Lord,” we pray.

If you remember your years as a child, you may recall happier times. As soon as we began to pray these Advent collects, my mother would announce that it is “cookie Sunday” and she’d begin to stir up the dough for those wonderful German *pfefernusse*. We read the same lessons then and heard over and over, as we still do, warnings about a thief, the heavens and earth dissolving in a chaos of noise and fire, and about a strangely dressed man in the wilderness who ate locust and wild honey. John the Baptist was admired but little understood.

To tell you the truth, those Bible readings never created much fear in our young hearts. Nor did the stirring sermons that followed them. Maybe I am only speaking for myself, but the fact is that we were not listening all that closely and the warnings of impending calamitous events just didn’t impress us that much. We were busy making cookies and learning parts for the Sunday School pageant and wrapping presents, and waiting for the coming of Christmas... even more than the coming of Jesus. There was a future to await and, with the exception of a few scrapes and bruises and childish disappointments, we were quite happy.

Now, reality has set in. We have travelled serious hills and valleys, smooth times and rough ones. Illness has taken its toll. Loneliness and bungled relationships have created black holes in our lives into which hopes and fears over the years have been swallowed. The days ahead that many of us can count are fewer than the days of our lives in the past. We know exactly what Isaiah is saying when he tells us that “all flesh is grass, its beauty like the flower of the field” and that “the grass withers and the flower fades.”

We continue to pray. Stir us up, O Lord, by your coming.

It is not surprising that God’s people are in need of comfort. In 587 BCE the Babylonian Empire devastated Jerusalem and marched off to its own cities Jerusalem’s religious and civic leaders, the wealthy, and the educated. They took the gold and silver and all the other human and material spoils of war. They left behind the weak and poor in even worse condition.

But the need for comfort was not because God felt sorry for them. The prophets, including Isaiah, repeatedly say that the people – all of them together and no one in particular – are to be blamed for their sad situations. “They had prospered through wickedness and oppression, lies and injustice, refusing to heed the prophetic calls to repent, reform and reconcile themselves to God.” (Dr. Solvang, Luther Seminary)

God commands that Jerusalem be comforted not because they deserved it but because they are, as God says, “my people.” Speak “tenderly to Jerusalem,” gently and with compassion, because they are my people. Tell them that their sins are forgiven, because they are my people. They are freed from their Babylonian captivity, because they are my people. They are “my people”, says God, and I will treat them with divine grace and release them from their suffering.

Surprisingly, I find myself now ministering in a nursing home. It wasn’t my first choice when I needed to move on, it was my only choice. But what a gift it has been. I believe that I am there in the sense that God commanded it. Certainly there is much comforting that needs to be done there.

Friday evening before leaving I checked the computer for admissions and discharges and saw that Dorothy had been moved to hospice care. You know what that means; it means that the nurses know when someone is nearing death.

So, I went up to see Dorothy. She was alone, in what felt like a wilderness place. It was dark outside and her room dimly lighted. There was noise from the hallway invading this quiet space. Dorothy was lying on her side, immobile, eyes open with a vacant stare, looking at an empty window, being fed through a tube. Frankly, this is not so unusual, and you get used to it.

As I took her hands, stroked her forehead, prayed and spoke gently to her, I could feel the slight grip in her fingers and a slow movement of her eyes to mine. She couldn't speak but I could, and I said, "God is here, Jesus is here." For me it was almost like a soft cry. Remembering the words from Isaiah, it was like being on a high mountain.

I suppose I could have said boldly and loudly, like a herald shouting over a crowd - "Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed you like a shepherd, he will gather you like a lamb in his arms, he will carry you in his bosom, and gently lead you." But that seemed like just too much.

It is not too much to say that God's forbearance, which is God's patience and God's comfort, as these days of Advent are, is our salvation. In the wilderness of our lives, whatever the conflicts and darkness, however few the days that we have left before we wither away, Jesus comes to baptize us with his Holy Spirit – not a depressed spirit, not a sad spirit, not a dying spirit. But a happy, stirring, spirit.

With that joyful, at-peace, Holy Spirit we pray once more,

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.