

November 29, 2015 First Sunday in Advent

Lighting the Wreath – Kevin and Nancy Mueller

In the beginning was the Word—spoken and breathed, a promise made and kept.

Listen and hear— God’s promise is true!

The Word was in the beginning, and through him all things come into being.

Eternal and near at hand, already and not-yet, God’s promise is the foundation of all life.

Listen! Hear the covenant anew, giving voice to a future with hope.

~candle is lit~

Prayer of the Day

Lord, we are excited that you wait to be born into this world. After a week of highs and lows, holidays and tragedies, we come here and pray to rediscover you in this place. Thank you for never leaving our side. Join our prayers and songs with the choirs of angels and saints of the ages. In you we pray, Lord and Master of all the Universe, Almighty God, Jesus Christ the son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Call to Confession

Prayer of Confession (to the tune of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”)

**Forgive us, Lord, for times when hope was lost,
And moments when we never thought to trust,
For times when we despair and forget
That you are where all joy and truth have met.
Forgive, forgive, forgive us all our sins
And help us hope and trust you without end.
Assurance of Pardon**

A righteous branch is springing up!

God shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

The Lord is our righteousness!

Friends, I proclaim to you that our sins are forgiven!

Alleluia! Amen!

PSALM 25:1-10

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;

let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O LORD;

teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
**for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.**

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
**according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!**

Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Prayers of the People

You, O Lord, have entered this earthly existence to walk in our shoes, to become susceptible to all that we are. You became as we are, tempted in every way. We thank you for walking alongside us in all things, sometimes so close to us you are barely perceptible to our senses.

Awaken our senses anew to your presence, allow our the chinks in our armor to spread a little wider to let in our wonder. As children of God, teach us anew to behold your mysteries and trust in your wondrous love. Discipline us into silence when there are no words to describe your mighty presence. Teach us to wait obediently and faithfully for your call. Energize us to speak out when your righteous anger is kindled.

We are yours, Mighty God. We wait for you.

We stand before you to intercede for those in need during this season of hope. For those who are hungry or homeless, we pray for them to be filled.

For those who struggle to find work, bring them dignity and hope.

For those who have trouble with mental illnesses, bring them peace.

For this world that reels in turmoil, help us to remember that you are coming to bring salvation.

Make us agents of your peace, bearers of hope to a groaning creation

Level us out, that we make a straight path for your arrival into our lives, so we can be humble bearers of your presence in a suffering world.

We lift up Tom Anderson, Tom Morris, ...

In your holy name, we pray with the confidence of children, "Our Father...Amen."

Time out For Teaching: The First Surprise!

There are many surprises during the Advent season. You are about to hear of the first one, which is that our Advent readings do not begin with a happy, warm and fuzzy story of a baby being born in a manger, or fuzzy sheep with their shepherds on a hillside receiving joyful news from angels.

Rather, it begins with cosmic, revealing signs of the Lord coming on the clouds. Let me ask you for a minute - how does it feel? As we look around at the pretty lights and the nativity scene and hear a message of the end of the world as we know it?

Remember that there was something similar going on during the season of Jesus' birth. After his birth, the "wise men" had to read the signs in the stars and had a message of a new king. They brought this message to King Herod, who found it pretty scary. His world as he knew it was threatened by the prospect of a new king. He acted out of fear, calling for all the little boy babies in the land to be killed. It caused Jesus and his parents to escape to Egypt for a while.

Sometimes things do seem bad when we talk about the coming of the Lord. But perhaps it's all in how we receive the news. It's not bad news to us, if we prepare for it. If we repent. If we humble ourselves. It's good news.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

14The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 15In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 16In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

9How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? 10Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

11Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 12And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Luke 21:25-36

25"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. 26People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. 28Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

29Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32Truly I

tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, 35like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Sermon: Anticipation

My family tradition was a lot like others'. A mystery of the season was preparing the way for that big tubby man dressed in furs and red velvet with a giant sack of toys; he would somehow manage to fit down our chimney and into our living room. Even though the fireplace was still hot with coals from the night before, he would arrive in the night, sneak gifts under the tree, eat our cookies and milk, and sneak back up the chimney.

Christmas Eve held an air of mystery, as my brother and I headed to bed. But first, we left food out for Santa in the living room, which we were never allowed to do the rest of the year. We would carefully select the prettiest Christmas cookies for him, pour the milk into the special Santa Mug - you know that one that's painted with Santa's face on it, and the handle is the end of his cap. Our family tradition has evolved with my brother's children so that they not only leave sweets out for Santa, they also leave carrots for the reindeer!

These traditions can teach us hope, and the anticipation that something good is on the way. And we knew that if we heard something go bump in the night, it was going to be okay. It was probably Santa.

Similarly, our gospel message is saying that something good is on the way – not Santa, but Jesus. At first glance, it might surprise you today - that Advent begins with an apocalyptic message. It sounds scary stuff, bad news even. For people who struggle with faith it can be hard to swallow. And while it sounds very wild and a little bit scary, it was reminding the early Christians that ultimately it was all meant for them to expect that something good was on the way. Watch for signs of my arrival, Jesus says.

There are those, like us sometimes, who focus so much more on the horrors and evil sat work in this world. As Christians, we are called not to shut out all the images of evil. We are

called to be realistic, even name the evil we see, be on the lookout, in the name of all that is holy, recognize and talk about the things we see are wrong.

Our faith informs us that when we witness evil at work, we know something is alarmingly wrong. Because we know peace and goodwill towards all is a better way. Because we believe that love can conquer all, even as we see courageous saints standing up for holy principles get killed in His name. Our hearts seem to be cut even deeper when we hear of the evil around the holidays. Like the shootings at the Planned Parenthood clinic the day after Thanksgiving.

There's a bumper sticker I remember seeing a couple decades ago - it still rings true today: "If you are not outraged, then you're not paying attention."

In this day and age we can get overwhelmed by negative images that play out on our TVs, radios and computer screens. It's tempting to just tune it all out. They can tip our hearts into sadness or despair, so much that it's hard to see the joy anymore. But Jesus isn't just calling us to look at the hard stuff, look for the good stuff as well; they are signs of His coming too.

Jesus affirms that things shall be hard at times. So hard, he says, you need to pray for strength to stand. But read the signs and know that God has not actually left us alone. In fact, God is still there, coming to us. He says, "Look at the signs, and expect me." Anticipate Jesus. Listen and hope not for the worst but for the best. Look carefully for the good even while the bad is happening. Stay watchful and celebrate the little things that bring light, joy and peace. Even like reminding our children to anticipate that good is on the way, leaving carrots and cookies out for Santa and his reindeer. Look for the signs that God is at work. C.S. Lewis referred to those little things as "patches of God-light," which dapple the dark forest floor. It

may seem dark in a forest, he says, but God does shine through the trees with spots of hope that we should cling to with joy.

It can feel like we live in a world of darkness. But look for those moments when light shines through. Listen and hope for signs of God's promises already being fulfilled. And when we see those patches of God-light, tell others about them, so we can all remain full of joyful anticipation, excited about the mystery of the Christ child to be born. Be watchful! Amen.