

Sermons for the Journey

The Rev. Duncan A. Burns

Advent 2 – Year B - 2017

Sunday, December 10, 2017

This past week we were decorating the Christmas tree at our house and feeling very nostalgic. There was Christmas music playing, a festive drink in our hand, the lights were turned low with the colored Christmas lights reflecting off the window. My wife and I were putting decorations on the mantle and pulling out Christmas ornaments from when our kids were young. Every ornament seemed to have story that we repeated one a year. We joked about how my father would always put tinsel on the tree one strand at a time and how he would constantly point to where we needed more lights and ornaments on the tree.

We placed the candle on the mantle that read Eric Alexander, who was our son that we lost as a baby and who we always remember at Christmas. We remembered how Buck, our Australian Shepard mutt used to knock off the low hanging ornaments on the tree. It is funny how the sights and smells of the season reminded me of the sixteen years that I spent with that puppy, who was as much a member of our family as any of us. Then we started to pull out the stockings. We found stockings for Andy, Lauren, and Samantha. Andy's stocking was slightly chewed up by Jackson, our Rescue Dog from Puerto Rico.

Then we found the stocking for Barb and one for me. My stocking was split at the seam from when my mom and dad used to over stuff it when I was a child. In the last box we found a stocking for mom and finally the Jet's stocking for my father, which we would not be putting out this year. We suddenly realized that Christmas was going to be very different this year without my father. It got kind of quiet in the room and mom left with the stocking in her hand.

Advent is a time for preparation of the arrival of Jesus Christ and Christmas, but it is also a time when we deeply miss those whom we love and see no more. We feel emptiness in the pit of our stomach that never seems to go away, but is very palpable during the holidays. We long for those days when we were together.

Last week, I set the stage for our reading from Isaiah:

A defining event in the history of Judaic history was the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BCE and the exportation of its inhabitants. As the Babylonians conquered Israel, the people of God were given the stigma of being punished for their sins. They were devastated by the intolerance of this foreign power to their religion. Forty eight years later a new power emerged. Cyrus, ruler of the Persians, conquered the Babylonians in 539BCE. Cyrus was a tolerant ruler. In 538BCE, he would allow the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and Judea and resume practicing their religion and traditions, as

long as that they recognized his authority. Today's Old Testament reading comes at this point in the history of the Israel when people were longing for things to return to how they once were.

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God...” A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40.1-3).

Times had been very tough for the people of Israel. They were feeling that emptiness in the bottom of their stomach. Being separated from their community in Babylon caused hardship and pain. There is no easy way to face this issue, but God asked the people to go forward and trust in him.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Prepare the way of the Lord. The holidays are a time when we get nostalgic. We remember the ones we love, but see no more. Each of us will wither like the grass. Each of us will join them one day. If you believe that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, then do not despair. Our temporal lives will end and Christ will come to bring us to the ones we love, but see no more. In the meantime, Christ comes to comfort us for the separation. Anxiety, and loneliness we feel. There was a song done by Joan Osborne in the 90's called, "One of Us." It wasn't a particularly religious album, but it made an important point to me.

**What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home?**

God was one of us. Jesus Christ came from heaven to live a fully divine and fully human life. God knows what it feels like to be lonely because Jesus cried out on the cross the prayer that we say from time to time. "Why have you forsaken me," Jesus exclaimed when he felt separation from God. Mark's Gospel says, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mark 1:2-3). You will notice an echo in the Old and New Testament readings today. The voice of God cries out through the prophets and through the Gospel. "Prepare the way of the Lord."

God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ that we might know the way, the truth, and the life. There is lots of darkness and loneliness in the world, but God comes to bring us light.

Advent is the time of the year that we prepare for the coming of that light. It is the hope of something better to come that marks this time in history. The hope is that a light will come in our darkness.

A messiah will soon come that will rid God's people of this terrible separation that they feel. I wish it was just as easy as opening a present on Christmas morning. To prepare the way of the Lord, we must surrender to God's control. Let's face it, there are lots of distractions in the Christmas season. We are busy shopping for presents, mailing Christmas cards and packages, chauffeuring our kids, ordering on our amazon app, buying food to entertain, going to parties, decorating, and travelling. We need to be intentional about preparing for the coming of the Lord. We need to carve out some time for prayer and worship. Faith just doesn't arrive on Christmas Eve. In many ways the rush and the push of the holidays makes it even more difficult to come into the nearer presence of God. The need to make room for God in our lives is a particular challenge for us on Christmas. The challenge is to get our lives aligned with God. Once we have made a decision to put Christ number one in our lives, we do not have to deal with the constant conflict of interests. The one who was born at Bethlehem will be the Lord of our lives, if we are willing to make room for him. All else that crowds our lives is measured by the standard of God's love and falls short.

John the Baptist tells the people that the Lord is coming and that they must prepare the way. God calls each of us to this new way of life. You were baptized with the Holy Spirit into new life. The Good News is that the light of Christ is coming. I light a candle every Sunday for my son Eric and my dad, for my wife's mom and dad, for her brother and for all those who we love, but see no longer. When we worship, I feel that heaven is joining us to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Last Sunday, a couple dozen of us sat in the choir pews and celebrated a *Taizé* service. As we sat and prayed in silence for the deep hole in our hearts that we feel, it felt like a Spirit of Comfort descended upon us. Several members of the congregation were weeping tears of joy for the nearer presence of the Lord that we felt. You see, God is one of us and comes to those who prepare a place for him.

This has been a very difficult year for many people both in this community and the world. Again, God calls out to all those in exile, prepare ye the way of the Lord. As we await his coming, let us be aware of the suffering in our community, in our nation, and in the world. Be kind to those who are suffering and help them to heal by your kindness and compassion. Your compassion is an echo from the prophets and from Christ and reverberates in our time and into the future. In Fact your kindness and love is Christ's light in a dark world! **Amen.**