

Advent Midweek 1, 12.2.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 26:1-6; Psalm 79:8-13; Matthew 7:21, 24-27

“Where are you headed? – Letting go”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Thank you for joining us this evening for Advent midweek worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church.

Tonight we begin a three-week series titled, “*Where are you headed? – Letting go, Listening, and Following.*” During the season of Advent we are, of course, preparing to hear again the good news about the birth of a Savior, Christ Jesus, born of Mary in Bethlehem – the Savior of the World, the Prince of Peace, the Light no darkness can overcome.

Decorations of the season are appearing at St. Mark’s: in the sanctuary there are Chrismon trees, blue paraments, and an Advent wreath with blue candles because blue is the color of hope, and outdoors, a stable and manger, along with wreaths on all the church doors with red ribbons. All of these symbols point toward the light of the world and the everlasting hope of our lives, Christ Jesus.

This Advent our midweek series begins with a question: “*Where are you headed?*” It is a two-fold question asking us about the *direction* and the *destination* of our Christian journey. As with any journey – short or long – we always confirm the direction we are headed to make sure we are on the right path to our destination.

We also remember that we do not journey alone, we have other companions with us on our journey. We journey together as the church with Christ as our shepherd. Yet at times, some of our cultural baggage can get in the way of following Jesus. The world teaches us to value individualism over participation in the group. Even if we are part of a team we are taught to aspire to a key position, and perhaps even the hope of shining brightly as the star of the team.

In the church, as the body of Christ, we remember that all members of the body are equally important. Christ is the head of the body and the Good Shepherd of the church, and so we journey together following Christ. Yet as individuals who want their own way, we can lose sight of the way Christ leads us on. We may find it hard to “let go” of certain things in order to follow Christ – our self-understanding and cultural identity may get in the way of hearing Jesus’ call to let go and follow him.

Advent provides a good opportunity to remind ourselves that for over 1500 years there were no Christmas trees, no appearances of Santa Claus in Christmas pageants, no lighted displays, no eggnog or fruitcake. Preparation for Christmas has always meant *preparing our hearts* to receive

the good news that a Savior is born and the kingdom of heaven has come near. Advent is a time to prepare the manger of our hearts asking ourselves once again “Is there room in the inn of my heart for Jesus?”

So we might say that Advent is a time of “letting go,” letting go of the rugged individualism the world tells us about “doing it my way,” letting go of a culture that tells us we need a lot of “stuff” to prepare for Christmas, letting go of the commercialism that tells us that if we don’t have a lot under the tree it won’t be a joyful Christmas, letting go of our own self-centeredness that gets in the way of hearing and seeing anything but ourselves. Advent is a time to let go so that we can embrace the leading of Jesus in our lives.

Back in the mid-1990s, before I taught at the seminary in Tokyo, my wife and I were missionaries in Japan at the very southern tip of the main island of Honshû. I was the pastor of a two-point parish and working full-time in the Japanese language. My wife and I worked with a Lutheran group called the *Ippo no kai* (一步の会), the “One Step at a Time Group,” that met monthly in the church. The *Ippo no kai* was a group of visually challenged and handicapped individuals, who met together for Bible study and fellowship, and we always attended their gatherings.

I remember traveling with this group one glorious sunny autumn day. We traveled together to Chômonkyô gorge (長門峡), which is a beautiful mountainous gorge that snakes along the Abukawa River, containing some of the most spectacular mountain vistas and autumn colors you could imagine. Care was needed on our hike because our companions were all visually challenged, many of them legally blind. Though the scenery was beautiful, we walked along narrow hiking paths above sharp cliffs that plummeted down the gorge into the Abukawa River. One misstep could lead to a serious accident.

After a picnic lunch in which people shared the fruits of autumn, apples, pears, and persimmons, we set out on our hike through the Chômonkyô gorge. My companion, Mr. Ando, asked me to walk a bit ahead of him, and he would hold my arm. He asked me to describe what I saw so that he could experience – through me – the spectacular landscape of our journey. I realized that Mr. Ando had to “let go” and trust me in order to walk together. He had to trust in my leading and my description of what I saw along the way.

As I have thought about this experience over the years, I have realized this is a description of the Christian journey. Each of us has to trust in the leading of Jesus and others; we have to let go in

order to take the journey of following Jesus and walking with the body of Christ. Through the witness of parents, family and other companions, we come to see the unseen kingdom of God and the presence of the Good Shepherd who leads us through all of life's mountaintop vistas and life's darkest valleys.

You see, we too, are people walking in darkness. We fool ourselves if we think otherwise. Each of us has been given both faith and reason to understand and search for meaning in life. But we need to "let go" of some things that get in the way of following Jesus. In following Jesus, we discover there is a reality available to us that is often hidden in the world, the reality of love, mercy, forgiveness, justice, and even compassionate suffering.

In the first reading for this evening, Isaiah writes, "*Those of steadfast mind, you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock.*" Letting go requires trust in God's presence to lead us on life's journey. When we trust God, we have an "everlasting rock" upon which we can step with certainty and upon which we can build our lives.

Letting go is not always easy, primarily because we don't always realize that we also walk in darkness. We have trouble really seeing what is at stake in the world for others and where our destination really is as human beings. We have allowed the selfishness of sin, a materialist culture, blinding nationalism, and our own preoccupation with ourselves, to set our course, rather than "letting go" of everything that stands in the way of discipleship to Christ Jesus.

Advent is an opportunity to let go of all of the "stuff" that the world tells us we need, so that again, we can take Christ's arm and allow him to lead us on a tremendous journey of faith. Letting go means abandoning our human willfulness and allowing God's will to guide our life and work as human beings.

In today's gospel, Jesus says, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*" During Advent we realize that we are on a journey toward the kingdom of heaven.

The life of Christian discipleship is about the constant task of learning to let go and let God's will guide our lives and our actions. This is not an easy task and requires prayer, confession, and the sacraments. It requires the fellowship of the body of Christ as our companions along the way.

In a time of pandemic, we realize our Christian journey has been made more difficult this year as we have been kept us apart as families, workplaces, schools, communities, and as a church. Because

of our sinful human inclination to always think we know best, human beings have made things even more difficult, leading to social division and conflict on a scale unseen in recent memory. The pandemic may have attacked us from outside ourselves, but our human division has come from within ourselves. It is to us, a people in need, that a Savior is born at Christmas.

Advent gives us the opportunity to “let go” of trying to control others and the world, so that we might allow God’s will to guide and control our hearts, our feet and hands, our thoughts and words, as we seek to be good neighbors and fellow travelers with others.

Jesus tells us, *“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”* Christ is the everlasting rock upon whom we can trust, in times of storm, flood, division, and even pandemic.

This Advent “let go” and take time to pray, to read, to meditate on God’s word. Let go and take time away from the 24/7 media barrage and circus that daily blinds us to the reality of God’s grace already around us. Take time to let go, placing your hope upon Christ the sure foundation. Together with Christ we finally see ourselves clearly, as a pilgrim people in need of a shepherding Savior.

This Advent, ask yourself “Where are you headed?” Is Christ my constant companion?

What do I need to let go of to follow him more faithfully?

This Advent let go and let Christ lead you on the journey of a lifetime. Amen.