

Advent Midweek 2, 12.9.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 41:13, 17-20; Psalm 126; Matthew 11:10-15

“Where are you headed? – Listening”

*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 continue our Advent midweek series titled, “*Where are you headed? – Letting go, Listening, and Following.*” This evening’s theme, “Listening,” comes from Jesus’ words in tonight’s gospel, “*Let anyone with ears listen!*” Each day, we are bombarded by many voices in the world asking us, even demanding, that we listen to them and often to them alone. Advent is an opportunity to listen for God’s voice about steadfast love, grace and freedom, good and evil, the hope of eternity, forgiveness, justice, compassion and mercy.

During Advent, Jesus reminds us that as we prepare our hearts for the birth of a Savior and his peaceful kingdom, and we are to listen for him as we journey through the wilderness of the world. During Jesus’ ministry, Jesus spoke quite a bit about seeing, hearing, and listening. Are our eyes open for signs of God’s kingdom, or are we blinded by the concerns of the world? Are we listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd, Jesus in our lives? Jesus is certainly there, but are we listening, or do we let other voices chart our course in life? Is the voice of Christ the center of our lives?

I think it is no mistake that both John the Baptist and Jesus had significant spiritual struggles in the wilderness. John appeared as a voice crying in the wilderness for people to return to God. After his baptism by John, Jesus, too, was driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. Both John and Jesus were tested in the wilderness, and both John and Jesus emerged from the wilderness having heard God’s voice with a message of good news.

It is crucial to notice that John and Jesus did not appear in the center of a large city, in the halls of power, or at great universities, they were first tested and given the power to listen, hear, and proclaim God’s word, in the wilderness. John and Jesus were sent into wilderness because the wilderness is where grace happens. The wilderness is a place of spiritual struggle, and it is also a place of God’s presence. Abraham, Moses, the Israelites, Elijah, John and Jesus, all experienced grace, protection, and renewal in the wilderness. This realization invites us to ask ourselves about our own wilderness moments in life. What have been and what are the wilderness moments in your life when God has spoken to you, giving you grace and strengthening your faith?

In today’s gospel, Jesus told the crowds that John was the messenger sent to prepare the way of the Messiah. Jesus was also very critical of the violent history surrounding those who tried to suppress John, and those who eventually killed him. Jesus told the crowds that John was the one

that all of the prophets had pointed to; yet rather than listen to the prophets and John, those in authority and the religious establishment chose not to listen. Instead, they killed the messenger; they killed John. Jesus interpreted the history of the powerful and those who chose not to listen to the prophets and John by saying, “*the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent have taken it by force.*”

During Advent Jesus’ words remind us we need to take time listening for voices proclaiming the grace and peace of God’s kingdom, not voices threatening God’s kingdom with force and violence. As followers of Jesus we are to discern God’s voice among the many other voices in the world.

At this time of the year during Advent, we probably shouldn’t be surprised to discover that we have domesticated the voice of Jesus. We forget how much of a wilderness the world still is. We forget how much of a struggle life and staying alive is for many in our world. During Advent we realize anew that we have turned the powerful voice and message of Jesus into a kind of syrupy muzak that is, at best, a kind of soothing hummable tune in the background of life. But Jesus comes to us like John out of the wilderness with a message of power, hope and grace. Jesus tells the crowds, and us, “*Let anyone with ears listen!*”

I have lived and worked in both Chicago and in Tokyo, Japan, two very large cities. So I can say without reservation that large cities can also be a wilderness: they contain homelessness, hunger and struggle, isolation and great loneliness. Large modern urban cities can be places of wilderness, places of temptation, struggle and challenge. After moving to Charlotte, I have also seen how this metropolitan area, for all of its beauty and convenience, can also be a wilderness for many. As a church we have many ministries to help the hungry, homeless, those in need of clothing, the sick, and the imprisoned. This is good work, and as the pastor, I am proud of St. Mark’s many committed and faithful members who participate in this work. Thank you for embodying God’s grace to others.

Yet the world can also be a wilderness even for those who have a place to sleep at night, a loving family, and enough to eat. The wilderness of the world and wilderness moments can come to all of us. The unrelenting challenges, doubts and fears of life can give each of us significant wilderness moments, experiences that often paralyze and scar us.

Our world and our nation are currently being shaken by the greatest challenge that most of us have ever experienced. The pandemic and the accompanying social division in our nation have made it harder, not easier, to listen for and hear the shepherding voice of Jesus, yet our current problems make it imperative that we listen for the voice of Jesus. Daily we are surrounded by many other voices, each asking, even demanding, that we listen and follow them alone. During Advent this year we have a tremendous opportunity to refocus our attention upon the voices of John and

Jesus speaking with a message of grace in the wilderness and pointing to the kingdom of God.

Whose voice has a privileged place to set the direction of your life? Whose voice offers the hope of reconciliation and healing in your life? Whose voice helps you interpret the many other voices and their messages in the world? Whose voice is at the very center of your life?

Jesus' message has always been about steadfast love, grace and freedom, good and evil, the hope of eternity, forgiveness, justice, compassion and mercy. Jesus talked about things that we infrequently hear the world's leaders, newscasters, and celebrities talk about. Jesus speaks of *ultimate concerns*; his message is about the peace that passes all understanding, a peace that gives transformation even in the midst of life's greatest challenges. God's grace creates faith in Christ that makes us truly free. Christ Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life that no one else can offer.

I don't know about you, but I am tired, tired of this year's challenges, weary of the distance and the isolation. Tired of the noise of many voices all wanting us to follow, but few of them pointing to Jesus and water in the wilderness. Yet in the midst of this year's pandemic wilderness, I know faith will lead us on, because the Good Shepherd walks with us, with this church, and with each of you.

In the reading from Isaiah, God says, "*I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.*" Isaiah reminds us that we are a world, nation and a church in the wilderness. The pandemic and our own sinful and divisive human ways have combined to challenge us like we have never been challenged before. We are surrounded by great wealth and technology, but these can only be of service if human beings have a clear vision of how to use them. Finding a path through the wilderness takes not only time and resources, but clear voices we can rely upon. You see, we never really leave the wilderness; to be human is to always be in the wilderness. Once the pandemic is gone, we will face new challenges, illnesses, and crises because that is human life. The good news is that God gives us water in the wilderness; God offers us grace on our journey.

So during this brief season of Advent, I encourage you to take time to listen a bit more closely for the voice of Jesus. He is already present within you, and has been all your life. I invite you to find time to decompress, turn off your technology, and simply listen to Christ at the center of your life. The quiet tradition of Advent may seem a bit quaint to some, but as modern people living in an increasingly noisy world, we are a people in need of relearning the art of being quiet. We are a people in need of shepherding, grace and water in the wilderness.

During Advent we sing, "*O come, O come, Emmanuel.*" Emmanuel means "God is with us." Daily, Jesus comes to us asking us where we are headed. This Advent, listen for the one voice that leads us to water in the wilderness. Listen for his voice. Listen for grace then embody that grace for others. Listen. Be water in the wilderness for others. Amen.