

Advent Midweek 3, 12.16.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 54:8-10; Psalm 125; Luke 7:24-30

“Where are you headed? – Following”

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

Thank you for joining us this evening for an Advent midweek service at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. Tonight we conclude our Advent series titled, “*Where are you headed? – Letting go, Listening, and Following.*” This evening’s theme, “*Following,*” is suggested by Jesus’ words about John the Baptist. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus asked the crowds what they hoped to see in the wilderness when they went out to look at John the Baptist.

Jesus asked the crowds three times about what they went into the wilderness to see, because it seems people may have been simply going out to look at something unusual, like an ancient version of sightseeing. Jesus was asking the crowds if they hoped to be “entertained” by some sort of spectacle in the wilderness. The word Jesus used for “look” means “to look at,” as in “looking at” a theatrical drama. Jesus was asking people if they were hoping to see a kind of divine “drama” performed by John, or did they realize that in going to see John they themselves were becoming a part of the drama of God’s salvation story. Jesus was asking people if they intended to look passively, or if they intended to actively participate in the drama of God’s unfolding salvation story.

I think Jesus’ questions to the crowd are particularly meaningful for us during this last week of Advent as we prepare for Christmas. Like Jesus, we could ask, “What do we hope to see at Christmas?” “What do we hope for on our journey with God at the end of this difficult year, 2020?” Jesus’ questions are also questions for us. What do we hope for on our journey of faith with Christ?

Jesus’ questions help us think about our own preconceptions of the Christian journey and following Jesus. I think all of us have had the experience of going on a trip somewhere with a carefully planned itinerary. Yet on that trip perhaps there were unexpected experiences that have become more lasting memories than the carefully planned itinerary.

When I was a professor at the Lutheran seminary in Tokyo Japan, I often traveled to Japanese congregations to speak and lead seminars. On one occasion, I traveled to Fukuoka on the northern edge of the island of Kyushu, not terribly far from Nagasaki. On that particular weekend I traveled with my wife and when we arrived at the airport, we were stunned at being surrounded by many other people from all over the world speaking different languages. No, it wasn’t Pentecost! As it turned out, on that particular weekend Lions Club International was holding their annual international convention. Fukuoka was the host city.

Suddenly it made sense why it had been so hard to get a hotel reservation for that particular

weekend, because everywhere I had checked, “there was no room in the inn.” Everywhere we went by train and bus we were surrounded by fellow travelers, groups of people speaking different languages, who had just arrived in Japan for the convention.

On Sunday morning after arriving at church, the pastor came to me saying there was a guest at the door and asked if would I go out to meet them. I went outside onto the front steps of the church and was met by a woman from Latin America who spoke no Japanese. As we spoke in English, she told me she had traveled to Fukuoka for the convention, and because it was Sunday, she had hoped to attend worship and receive Holy Communion. Though she was Roman Catholic there was no time for her to travel by bus or taxi to a Roman Catholic Church, so the pastor and I invited her to stay for worship, which she did. Though I never saw her again, I realized we had become part of not only her sightseeing trip to Fukuoka, but also briefly, companions on her Christian journey.

Again, after the service that day, I was scheduled to lecture on church history. Before my lecture began, the pastor again asked me to meet another guest who had come to worship that Sunday. I was introduced to a silver haired gentleman who told me he had been a Lutheran missionary in Fukuoka in the 1960s. In the fellowship hall there were photographs displayed of previous pastors and missionaries, among which, he found his photo. The photographs on the wall were like a visual record of a procession of faithful travelers along the way of Jesus, and his photograph was among them, witnessing in that hall, to a place on his journey with Christ and with that congregation.

I tell you this story because I traveled to Fukuoka to speak at a church, something I had done a great many times as a seminary professor. Like someone answering Jesus’ questions to the crowd, I would have said, “I traveled to see the people of Fukuoka and speak to them about Christ.” But I realized that I had also traveled there to help welcome a stranger to worship and to help someone reconnect with a moment in their past, allowing them look back on their journey of faith.

On all of our journeys, things happen that are not scripted and are different from our original plans. On all of our journeys God finds a way onto our paths and into the narrative of our stories so that the drama of God’s salvation story might be broadened and deepened in and through our participation. We recognize Christ among us because we have heard his voice and recognize him among our fellow travelers. Each of us probably has stories about unexpected twists, turns and surprises on our journeys, when we have been joined by Christ. The point is that when we follow Christ, we never quite know how we may be called upon to help others on their journeys.

Today’s gospel reading quotes Malachi 3:1, “*Behold, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.*” John was the messenger sent to prepare the way for Christ. John heard the voice of God and followed it into the wilderness offering a baptism of repentance to help people

prepare the way for Christ into their hearts. John heard God's call and followed.

During Advent, I also remember Mary and Joseph responding in faith, traveling to Bethlehem for the Roman census, and not being able to find a room. Like our trip to Fukuoka and having difficulty finding a room in a hotel, I also thought of the crowds of people who had traveled to Bethlehem from all over the Roman Empire, accompanying Mary and Joseph on their journey. In the midst of the crowds Mary and Joseph traveled trusting in God's promise, and they were helped by an unnamed stranger who let them stay in the stable because there was no room in the inn.

The Advent and Christmas story continues to have meaning for us, if we will but imagine how each of our lives are also a response and journey following Christ's voice and promise. Like John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph, and so many others, all of us have heard the voice of Christ inviting us to follow him in the wilderness so that we might have light in the darkness.

To let go, listen and follow Christ is an enormously radical attitude toward life. To follow the voice of Christ is to trust that *there is a destination* far beyond our own imaginings – that there is a destination beyond all of our planning. By letting go of our need to control everything, we realize that it is God who is actually in control of our future, helping us discover who we really are, and where our true destination is in his kingdom.

One week before Christmas, in the midst of a pandemic and a very harrowing year, we again realize that to follow the light of Christ is a courageous way of walking in the darkness. To follow Christ means being open to God's eternal horizon – a horizon upon which we glimpse God's kingdom in the distance, and as we walk toward that horizon God's kingdom pulls us in.

Advent is again about "letting go, listening and following" the promise of God in our lives. Mary trusted the angel's promise, and with Joseph, they traveled to Bethlehem; the shepherds went to see what they had heard proclaimed by the heavenly host; the Magi followed a star to a destination that they could never have imagined. It was a journey of risk and danger, a journey of choices, listening to God's voice amidst all of the noise and other voices in the world. On roads crowded with travelers from all over the world, Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem; crowds went to John in the wilderness; crowds came to Jesus for healing; and even still, crowds continue to come to his cross for forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection. At Advent we realize anew that we are also among crowds of people who continue to travel a royal highway stretching into God's horizon of promise.

This Advent and Christmas, again open your heart to the voice of Christ. Let go, listen and follow him over a lifetime. Christ will use your gifts in the wilderness, opening your heart and your hands to others so that they, too, might also experience God's grace, love and light. Christ is light. Follow that light in the darkness. Amen.