

Advent 3, 12.12.2201

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

“God is near”

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

Today’s Service of Lessons and Carols is a tradition at St. Mark’s, and also one that reaches back into 19th century England with services that sought to tell the prophetic story of Christ’s birth through the interplay of scripture and hymns. This service is traditionally part of Advent with the clear message that “God is near.” As Jesus says in the Gospel of Mark, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*” As Christmas nears, we also hear that God is near, calling us to repent and believe in the good news of Jesus.

Yet there is a strange absence of this message in the cultural Christmas that surrounds us at this time of the year. The cultural Christmas is largely a consumerist holiday in which we are told that Santa is coming to town, rather than the God who draws near to us in Jesus. The beauty of today’s service of lessons and carols is that it reminds us that God is near and cares about this world.

The first reading from Isaiah speaks of “*a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord.*” These words ring especially true in the wilderness of the world today. The wilderness and our wilderness moments in the world are the reason we prepare for the Messiah who comes to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths. We await the one who will lead us in the darkness of the world; we await the light of the world, Jesus Christ.

I know that children wait with glee for Christmas morning, for presents and Christmas dinner with family and friends. These are marvelous traditions which point us to the greatest gift we will ever receive - the gift of Jesus in our lives. It is probably good during Advent to remind ourselves of this as we wrap gifts, decorate and plan gatherings. Jesus is God’s greatest gift to the world. The lights with which we decorate our homes and towns are a symbol of Christ, the light of the world. As we prepare to gather in our homes, we remember that Jesus is the silent guest at all our meals and festive gatherings.

In today’s Service of Lessons and Carols, we sense that God is near. Isaiah 35 reads, “*Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God..He will come to save you.’*” We live in a world that is in desperate need of comfort, strength and hope. The message, “*Be strong, do not fear!*” is not simply a coaching pep-talk about digging down deep within oneself for strength. Isaiah’s words point to God’s saving

work, “*Here is your God...He will come to save you.*” The gift of Jesus is the most profound inner strength we will ever experience.

The gift of Jesus reflects the universality of God’s love for all humanity in all the earth. Jesus, the King of kings, comes into the world born in a humble stable to a young couple seeking to find their way in life. Jesus is the one whom the prophet Zechariah said would come humbly as the king riding on a donkey. This king, Jesus, sought out not the elite or the beautiful but came to the outcast and poor, the possessed and the dispossessed, the sick and the sinful. He came not to call the righteous but sinful humanity – all of us. Jeremiah’s words proclaim, “*He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*” God cares about all of us.

This is the king for whom we wait during Advent. God is near, reminding us that the kingdom of God is very near – it is within us. The humble stable and manger where Christ Jesus is born anew is within us. This is the greatest gift: a God who dwells in and within our flesh and bones so that in all we do, we might give hope to others. I would like to tell you two personal stories that have stayed with me over the years about learning to give hope to others.

One Advent shortly before Christmas, my mother came to her children and made a request. She told us about a family that had three children, like ours, and that their parents could not afford gifts that year. My mother asked us if we would each consider choosing one of our toys, something new or in nearly new condition that could be wrapped and given away to this family. Though I was only about 8 or 9 years old and I no longer remember what I chose to give, I still remember the evening that the mother and father of this family came to my parents’ home. I remember that mother’s tears when she received these unexpected gifts from one family’s children to hers. As I reflect upon this memory I realize it is one of the earliest memories I have of understanding the profound importance as an individual of giving hope to others.

The second story took place many years later. One Christmas when I was home from college, my father asked me if I would deliver a check from our church to a local food pantry that did work in our Chicago community. My home congregation always gave money away at the end of the year out of our abundance to help others. That year, our humble congregation had a surplus of gifts and wanted to help others in our community. I am guessing that, adjusted for inflation today, the amount of the check was probably about \$3,000.00. It was after dark when I arrived at the food pantry. I rang the bell and was let inside and asked for the director of the food pantry, to whom I had been instructed to hand the check. I will never forget this person’s words, as they said, “You have no idea

how much this gift will be of benefit to so many others.” Through this second experience I began to understand the importance as a church of giving hope to others.

Two experiences: one taught me about giving out of my abundance, the other taught me about giving out of the church’s abundance as a sign that God is near. Both taught me that God works through our hands. As Christians, we give because Christ first gives to us. Jesus was born and gives himself to you and to me so that we might learn to give hope to others. Our gifts point to the greatest gift anyone can ever receive, Jesus Christ.

This is what we anticipate at Christmas: God is near. God gives us God’s very self. This is why we give offerings, donate food, and offer our time and talents. This is our response to a loving God who always draws near to us with grace and love. In Jesus we see what our humanity is truly capable of. In Jesus, we finally understand that we are capable of drawing near to others with hope.

On the third Sunday of Advent, surrounded by glorious sounds of music and the profound promise of the God who draws near, we ask ourselves, “What will be our response to God’s gift?” When the Christmas lights and decorations are all packed away, the gift of Christmas will continue. God will continue to draw near to each of us every day with grace and love. How will you respond?

This is not only an individual question, but it is also a question we ask ourselves as a congregation. How will we continue to respond to the God who draws near to us? Mary’s response in the reading this morning is perhaps the most famous response in scripture: “*Here am I, let it be unto me according to your word.*” In 1521 Martin Luther wrote the following about Mary’s response, “Mary is nothing for the sake of herself, but for the sake of Christ...Mary does not wish that we come to her, but through her to God.”

This is what we are about as a church. We hope that people will not only come to St. Mark’s, but that through our ministries people will discover the grace, forgiveness and compassion of God.

God is near. At the end of Mark’s gospel, Jesus says, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*” Christmas is near. How will you respond?

May you respond like Mary, saying, “*Here am I, let it be unto me according to your word.*” This is what we do. We give from the abundance of God’s grace so that the world will know that God is near.

Give, live and serve so that others might know “God is near.” Amen.