

12.4.2024 Advent Midweek 1

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Psalm 25:1-10; Isaiah 1:24-31

“Make me to know your ways”

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

The season of Advent is very ancient and was originally celebrated somewhat like the season of Lent. In the medieval world, though less strictly observed than Lent, Advent even included fasting. Can you imagine trying to encourage fasting today with all the Christmas gatherings and food traditions that take up so much of the month of December!

Yet Advent reminds us we are truly awaiting the “advent” of Jesus and his Second Coming on the Last Day as the Judge of the nations. Yet such an understanding of Advent is truly at odds with the cultural and secular forms of Christmas as they are celebrated today. So what meaning is there to observing the Advent season amid a world overwhelmed by a cultural and even secular understanding of Christmas? Because to be honest, for many, Christmas is easily celebrated without Jesus.

For me, the modern meaning of the Advent season has always rested in its counterpoint to the materialism and consumerism of the modern Christmas season. In the month leading up to Christmas many of us are busy not only with family and work responsibilities, but are also so busy preparing for the “things” of Christmas that we often have precious little time to reflect upon the meaning of Christmas. Midweek services like this allow us to live into the Advent season, meditating upon its themes, and enriching what is often a very busy and stressful season.

Tonight’s responsive reading, Psalm 25, was also the appointed psalm for the First Sunday in Advent. Psalm 25 uses the words “way” and “path” several times, even alluding several more times to the ways and paths of the Lord in our lives. The Psalmist writes, “*make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.*” The psalmist’s words come as a surprise to people used to “striking out on our own,” to doing things “my way,” and to telling people who may disagree with us that it’s “my way or the highway.”

These little words “way” and “path” encourage us to see that God invites us to travel on ways and paths that are different from those of the world. It’s probably also helpful to remind ourselves that the first name ever used for the Christian religion was “The Way.” In the Book of Acts (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 19:23) Christianity was called “The Way” because Christians followed in the way of Jesus Christ in this world.

We might also remind ourselves that it was Jesus who revealed himself as “*the way, and the truth, and the life*” (John 14:6), and that Jesus says to any who desire to come after him, “*Follow me.*” To be a Christian has long been about the discipleship of walking with and following alongside of Jesus.

So at the beginning of Advent, the words of Psalm 25 encourage us to meditate upon the ways we walk in this world. What are the paths that I travel daily? Are these paths ways of self-fulfillment, material things, and consumerist “stuff?” Am I more concerned about fulfilling my own needs rather than walking in the paths of steadfast love and faithfulness?

These two little words “way” and “path” have very particular meanings in Hebrew. “Way” means “a course of life” or “a manner of acting” in life. “Path” means “a course or road upon which travelers journey.” But what is crucial to see with both of these words is that they are used about God: “*make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.*”

Though we might not think of God in this way, God travels through this world in ways and on paths often unseen and unnoticed. God’s ways and paths include steadfast love, forgiveness, faithfulness, and grace. At the beginning of Advent, Psalm 25 helps us by offering a map by which we can journey and live not only these brief days of December but throughout the year.

Verse 10, the final verse of Psalm 25 for this evening reads, “*All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.*” The word covenant reminds us that God’s promises continue to be alive with grace and love for this world. The word translated as “decrees” (*edah*) literally means God’s decrees and teachings that take place in community, which is why it was translated into Greek as *ekklesia* or church.

In other words, the ways and the paths of the Lord that Christians have followed for two millennia take place in the community of Christ’s body the church. We might say that God’s ways and paths, God’s covenant and decrees, have no identity apart from the communities that God gathers his people into. Gathered into the church, Christians are to share the steadfast love and faithfulness of God with the world.

In contrast, the appointed reading from Isaiah for this evening makes the ways and paths of the world abundantly clear. In Isaiah, God promises to work against evil, restoring the judges and counselors who have become corrupted by injustice. At the end of this reading from Isaiah, the strong in the world are said to be like dry wood, ready for kindling. “*The strong shall become like tinder and their work like a spark.*” In other words, the works of violence,

corruption and injustice of the strong will, in the end, consume them. In these two brief readings, we again see how Advent can be a countercultural way of preparing for the birth of the One who is “*the way, the truth, and the life.*”

During Advent, as you buy gifts, attend gatherings, and send cards to loved ones, remember that you are also traveling on the ways and paths of the Lord. You are accompanied by the Savior Jesus Christ, who came into this world not to receive gold or silver, but to give his life for others.

During Advent, remember that it is in following him and in giving our lives in imitation of him, that we give the gifts steadfast love and faithfulness that money cannot buy.

May your prayer for Advent always begin, “*Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.*” Amen.