

## December 6<sup>th</sup> Devotional

**Prayers:** the family of John Livingston who passed away November 23<sup>rd</sup>, Julie Magee's father. Jim Olsen who is recovering from surgery.

### Second Sunday of Advent

#### Introduction

John calls people to repent, to clear the decks, to completely reorder their lives so that nothing gets in the way of the Lord's coming. The reading from Isaiah gives the context for this radical call: the assurance of forgiveness that encourages us to repent; the promise that the coming one will be gentle with the little ones. Isaiah calls us all to be heralds with John, to lift up our voices fearlessly and say, "See, your God is coming!" We say it to one another in worship, in order to say it with our lives in a world in need of justice and peace.

#### Confession and Forgiveness

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires know, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Most merciful God, **we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.**

In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for his sake God forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

#### Greeting

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

#### Prayer of the Day

Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way of your only Son. By his coming strengthen us to serve you with purified lives; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen.**

#### First Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

*In grand, flowing, poetic lines, the prophet announces that the exile of God's people in Babylon is over. God will deliver Israel and will care for her as a shepherd cares for the sheep. This word can be trusted, because the only enduring reality in life is the word of God.*

<sup>1</sup> Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

<sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

<sup>3</sup> A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

<sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

<sup>6</sup> A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

<sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

<sup>9</sup> Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

<sup>10</sup> See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

<sup>11</sup> He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

### **Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13**

<sup>1</sup> You have been gracious to your land, O LORD; you have restored the good fortune of Jacob.

<sup>2</sup> You have forgiven the iniquity of your people and blotted out | all their sins.

<sup>8</sup> I will listen to what the LORD God is saying; for you speak peace to your faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to you.

<sup>9</sup> Truly, your salvation is very near to those who fear you, that your glory may dwell in our land.

<sup>10</sup> Steadfast love and faithfulness have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

<sup>11</sup> Faithfulness shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

<sup>12</sup> The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase.

<sup>13</sup> Righteousness shall go before the LORD and shall prepare for God a pathway.

### **Second Reading: 2 Peter 3:8-15a**

*This short letter deals with pressing concerns regarding the final advent of Jesus, especially concerns that could arise over its apparent delay. The author of the letter calls on Christians to anticipate the promised coming of the Lord through conduct dedicated to God.*

<sup>8</sup> Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. <sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. <sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

<sup>11</sup> Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, <sup>12</sup> waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? <sup>13</sup> But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

<sup>14</sup> Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; <sup>15a</sup> and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

### **Gospel: Mark 1:1-8**

*The Gospel of Mark does not begin with a story of Jesus' birth but with the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.*

<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; <sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

**Message:** Northeastern Iowa Synod Bishop - The Rev. Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl

PREPARE is the theme for the 2nd Sunday of Advent. When we think of Advent as the “Get-Ready-For-Christmas” season we can quickly get caught up in preparing, right? I’m a list-maker, so I make a gift list, a grocery list, a to-do list, a list of menus, a card list, and on and on. Back when we traveled for holidays, I’d make a packing list. All about preparing; being ready for Christmas. Something about the order that I believed all my lists created was calming when I felt there were too many things to do and never enough time. In truth, not many things on all those lists had much to do with what I believe Christmas is all about: God comes to us in Jesus. Most of my list items were about family traditions and expectations of what a holiday should include, mainly food, but also presents.

I suspect many of you know exactly what I mean about all this preparation. On top of work, school, other roles and jobs, there is the feeling that we need to make Christmas happen. It’s on us to get it right. On us to be prepared; to organize and schedule, to save and to spend so that we pull it all off.

When I led grief groups as a hospital chaplain earlier in my ministry many bereaved people would talk about how they dreaded Christmas without their loved one who had died. When we talked it all through in our support groups often the realization came that it wasn’t so much Christmas itself, it was all the build up that they couldn’t face. All the seeming merriness and joy all around that was hard to rise up to; all the conversations about how much everyone was doing around Christmas which can sound like a competition, of sorts, to see who can out-do one another. Those in grief felt it was like a gauntlet to run through where words and attitudes and plans and only happy emotions were the weapons that beat upon these sorrowing souls, until finally Christmas came, and the grieving found themselves sitting quietly in a church pew, listening to ancient songs and prayers, and hearing the old story of God coming in simplicity and poverty to a spectacularly unprepared world.

When we met in the weeks after Christmas, people described how suddenly, the sorrowful felt comforted; suddenly those who lost the competitive sport of preparedness felt valued anyway. Suddenly, preparation meant open ears and hearts and hands were far more important than full ovens and over-present-ed trees. The focus changed for them from having all things ready, to receiving God’s great gift....ready or not.

This simple truth about preparedness for Christmas, and about keeping this aspect of Advent faithfully is a lesson I learned again years later. One Advent I made a trip to South Dakota Synod’s Companion Synod in Cameroon, Africa, with my family: 3 teenagers at that point, and my husband. The adventure of our lives. We traveled with our hosts tightly packed into one vehicle for many miles over terrible roads only to be greeted by a whole village singing at the edge of town to welcome us to a multi-hour worship service. The roads weren’t the only terrible conditions we observed in our travels to the remote and rural parts of our Companion Church’s congregations. The people lived in poverty, without basic infrastructure like running water, or garbage control, or stable food sources.

As Advent’s weeks and readings went on at service after service I was struck by the emphasis in our African siblings’ church culture. In the absence of Christmas trees, and Advent wreaths, and decorations on every building, their Christmas *spirit* was being prepared. No shopping mall crowds, or supermarket sales, or wrapping paper was involved in their preparing for Christ’s birth among them. Our family experienced this, and talked about it with our hosts, (The Presiding Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Cameroon). He told us the people were in fact preparing. They were preparing their *joy*.

It was no secret that their lives were difficult and their circumstances challenging. But their Advent focus was on their joy: joy in Jesus; joy in forgiveness; joy in community; joy in love; joy in the sacraments; joy in the hope of eternal life with Christ; joy in so many things. Not artificial joy to put on a brave face. This joy was a clear and honest recognition of all that they struggled with, AND YET....there was joy to prepare. Joy to harvest. Joy to capture and treasure. They searched for it in the midst of their daily struggles to stay alive, to provide shelter for loved ones, and to eek out a living. They searched for joy when none was visible to the untrained eye.

Much like the ELCA Hunger Appeal study we are following this Advent, where community leaders find reasons to hope in the present, though many struggles surround them daily, through working on what will make the future better. They take steps and actions daily toward a better future, toward fulfilling the hope God plants in their hearts. They search for joy, and hope, and love in the midst of discouragement, lack of resources, and personal risks. They persevere in preparing for a fuller joy in the future, and an appreciation of what they CAN do today. Thus, they prepare for the future, the fulfillment of their hopes, the promises that will be kept. They prepare for joy.

We hear the call to prepare for joy in today’s lessons. In Mark, who writes with urgency about preparing a straight way for the One who is to come. In Isaiah, who also talks about a straight way as a path for bringing comfort to people of God. The rough places will be smoothed; the surprising twists and turns that frighten or paralyze us will be pulled straight, made plain, and clear for us. That is our future in faith. That is our hope for tomorrow, and all the challenges it brings.

That is the joy we prepare our hearts for every single day. Advent's hope calls us to be ready, to prepare for all that is to come. Better days ahead, certainly, but also training our eyes to see joy in the midst of today.

This kind of preparation was evident in a sweet tweet I read a few days ago. A mother recounted her car conversation with her 8 year-old child. The child asked: "Do you want me to throw the confetti in my pocket?" The mother replied: "No, not in the car! Why do you have confetti in your pocket?" The child: "It's my emergency confetti. I carry it everywhere in case there is good news."

Prepare your Spirit for joy this Advent, in these challenging times, in the midst of your own grief, in the face of deep fatigue. Find comfort in the sure and certain knowledge that our ways will be made straight, our paths smooth. Find hope in the presence of Jesus in our hearts and world bringing new life in all circumstances. Find joy in joining Jesus on this temporarily rocky, twisting, bumpy way. And carry confetti, for surely there is good news.... Amen

### **Prayers of Intercession**

God of power and might, comfort your people and come quickly to this weary world. Hear our prayers for everyone in need.

Faithful God, you teach us to wait for you with faithfulness and patience. Sustain and support us in our doubts and questions. Nurture our faith as we discern and enact your mission. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Leading God, you ask us to make uneven ground smooth. Make even the disparities between your people. Sustain and support people with physical and intellectual disabilities. Accompany disability advocates who work for a world accessible to all. Teach us to celebrate the great diversity in our midst. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Tender God, you know sorrow and joy alike. We pray for those in our families and congregation who are not joyful in this holiday season. Comfort those who grieve, be a companion to all who are lonely, tend those who are sick or struggling with depression, and gather all people in your healing embrace. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Eternal God, we give thanks for the saints who have prepared your way in the wilderness and taught us to continue their faithful work. Make their generous lives an example for all. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Draw near to us, O God, and receive our prayers for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **Holy Communion**

#### **Prayer after Communion**

Gracious and abundant God, you have done great things for us, and we rejoice. In this bread and cup you give us life forever. In your boundless mercy, strengthen us and open our hearts to the world's needs, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

#### **Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

#### **Blessing**

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine on you with grace and mercy.

The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. Amen.

#### **Dismissal**

Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.

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**Upcoming Commemorations:** Thursday, December 3, 2020 - Francis Xavier, missionary to Asia, died 1552. A native of the Basque region of Spain, Xavier became a missionary to India, Southeast Asia, Japan, and the Philippines. He also helped to found the Society of Jesus (Jesuits).