

November 29, 2015



“God is With Us: The Promise Fulfilled”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Matthew 6:25-33

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

The season of Advent opens a new church year as we cycle back around to again revisit the ancient story of God’s great creating and redeeming and sustaining love for us and for the whole creation. It’s time to hear again the most astonishing news—that God is with us.

Here at church we signal the new season with a change of color—as you can see, we’re now decked in the midnight blue of the season, a blue that is the color of the night sky just before dawn. A darkness just ready to brim over with light, the light of a new day, new beginnings, new promise, new hope. It’s the light we perceive before we see it, because we have longed for it and yearned for it to come into our darkness.

Advent begins in darkness, the wonderful preacher Fleming Rutledge has said. It begins in the darkness of the real world as we know it. It begins in the darkness of the night as we experience it, in the darkness of our hearts, the darkness of this world.

Have you not wakened in the middle of the night, troubled by all the cares and worries of the day which only seem to grow bigger and more fearsome in the dense darkness? And have you not felt the relief of peeking your eyes open some hours later, so very grateful to sense the coming of the dawn?

It’s like that, Advent. It’s a season of four weeks that the church has set aside for generations and generations, a sacred and precious gift of time. A time to name our darkness as well as our deep longing for the light. To light the Advent wreath candles, adding one each week to push back the darkness and illumine our hearts.

The church, in all its ancient wisdom, sets aside four Sundays of Advent and invites us to pay attention and try and take it all in and get ourselves ready. Not just our homes and our gifts and our decorations and all that—but ourselves, our hearts, our souls. That’s what worship is for during these crazy weeks...it’s our time to stop, to go quiet, to pay attention to what God is doing in our lives and in our world, and like Mary herself, to ponder all these things in our hearts, in the darkness of the night, in the darkness of this world. Mary, awaiting birth, surely wondering what in the world this promise that “God Is With Us” could possibly mean...

How, then, will the word of Advent speak to us this year? Can it still bring, even to us, in these days, in this place, true words of hope and promise? Can our hearts find in this season some rest, some nourishment, some new light?

Pay attention to God, to what’s really going on, is the invitation of this season. Listen. See. Hear. For God is working even now to turn the world upside down and inside out and make all things new. Advent gives us time to consider again what God is doing even now in this world, in our lives, to bring forth hope and peace. Oh, it might seem hopeless and lost, dreary and dismal. BUT...we will not give in to despair. We will choose hope. For unto us, a savior will be born. God promises to be with us and that promise will be filled.

The Scriptures of this first Advent Sunday readings actually present for our consideration two very different pictures of how God’s promise will be fulfilled in this world—on the one hand, the apocalyptic vision in Luke’s gospel and on the other, the prophetic proclamation in Jeremiah. Two different visions that hold in exquisite tension the terror of end-times and the promise of ages, these two pictures-- a vision of terror and a vision of salvation--still fight for the allegiance of the human heart.

Have we not felt our hearts vacillating between these two visions in these recent weeks? Need I rehearse headlines from the papers—Beirut, Paris, Bamako, Brussels, Colorado Springs...? The picture we choose as our window on the world makes all the difference in how we live and in how we cope with the fearsome things of the night.

Luke says: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding for what is coming upon the world...”

This vivid, dramatic, ominous apocalyptic imagery of Luke’s Gospel graphically names the fears of our time and of our hearts: distress among nations confused by the roaring waters of sea and waves and signs in the heavens.

Living as we do foundering in war, fearful of more extremist attacks, how dare we look for the Lord in the wind and the waves or in the night sky? Many in this generation have passed away. Many have perished. Many live in fear and

foreboding, for the only thing they can see “coming upon the world” seems to bear the violent face of war and poverty, destruction and disease.

Luke uses strong, dramatic language to describe how very horrible this world can sometimes be. And we know that. We see and hear it daily. Wars. Rumors of wars. Guns and suicide vests. We know. We know. It's part of what keeps us awake in the dark. It's why our own fears and worries get so big.

What we need to hear and ponder this morning is that God has another word for us and it comes from his prophet, Jeremiah, for it is precisely to this same nightmare that Jeremiah speaks. In his own time, Jeremiah looked around and saw only destruction, only a wasteland where Jerusalem once stood. The “facts of life” as he observed them, were just like those in Luke's vision. And yet, and yet...the prophet Jeremiah reaches deep and is sustained by his conviction that “the outcome of human history is in the hands of God. God—who could be trusted to make the city a place of safety and the land a center of salvation.”

The prophet announces confidently the word of the Lord: “The days are *surely* coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made...in those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” Expect a new future, Jeremiah is reminding them. Expect a new future. For our God has promised us this.

Listen. He said: “The days are *surely* coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made...in those days I will cause a righteous branch to spring up and he will bring justice and righteousness to the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.”

Yes, the days are coming—they are days of promise and hope. The people will be saved and restored and in the holy city, all will live in safety. This is what God intends, for us and for the world.

As the Apostle Paul teaches: “... in Christ every one of God's promises is a “Yes.” For this reason it is through him that we say “Amen,” to the glory of God.

“We have peace,” the Scripture tells us, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; let us rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God,” to use Allan Boesak's translation.

God's word to us through his prophet is a promise, God's covenant with us. So that even in the midst of days of destruction and violence and fear, we cling to hope. We stand on the unshakeable ground of God's everlasting love for us. We know that even in the darkness, precisely in the darkness, God is with us. God's light shines.

God is with us in the birth of Jesus—the one born in a manger, in a stable, among the animals, for whom there was no respectable place in the rooms of the inn. The one forced to flee from the wrath of a vengeful monarch, a refugee among countless others. The one who lived among the poor and knew from his own experience what it means to live in fear. This Jesus, this one in whom God is incarnate, comes to be with us to speak to those places in our hearts, in our world, that need him most.

The whole Christian story, it seems to me, is about how God chooses to be with us in love. This is what love looks like, overcoming the darkness of our lives and of this world. God sends Jesus in the darkest dark of the night. The big darkness is overcome by the birth of one tiny baby. In that night, God's love in Christ Jesus triumphs over the power of hopelessness and fear and a special star shines so bright that the whole of the night sky is brilliant with light. And years later, again in the dark darkness of the night, the stone is rolled away from the face of the tomb. In that night, God's love in Christ Jesus triumphs over all the powers of death. And the sun rises on that morn to pierce the darkness with rays of healing and hope.

What does love look like? Love looks like Emmanuel, God with us, the light of the world.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it. And so, should you wake in the night, and all the fears loom up, pray with the Psalmist and God's people through the ages: “You, O Lord, are my lamp; my God, you make my darkness bright.”

God is with us in Christ Jesus, the Light of the World.

O come, o come, Emmanuel, God with us. Come to us to be our light, our hope, our companion, our peace and our joy.
AMEN.

Notes:

The title of this Advent series comes from [God Is With Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas](#).

F.Thomas Trotter. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997.

Allan Aubrey Boesak. [Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics](#). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.

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