

Sermon | Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10 | James 5:7-10 | Matthew 11:2-11

The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | December 11, 2022

Christ is coming! Just two more weeks! I'm sure most of you are completely ready for Christmas. I am the type of person who you would find on 25th evening at a store looking for a Christmas tree and some decorations. But I'm trying to get better.

This third Sunday of Advent, we rejoice. We rejoice with the hope that God breaks into our world. This morning we rejoice because in God we have hope that salvation and flourishing will come. It will come for all. For us, for our families, for friends, for our cities and nations, and for all creation. Christ is coming! Our salvation is coming.

It may sometimes be hard to believe that salvation is coming. That God is coming to bring healing and wholeness. The letter of James was written in one such context.

Imagine getting a letter whose very first sentence immediately after the opening greetings reads: "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face various trials, consider it all joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance." This is how the letter of James begins. James tells us that whenever we face trials, we are not to lose hope but persevere. To be clear this perseverance is not a passive acceptance of trials. The letter of James is all about working out your faith in radical ways, ways which will undoubtedly lead to trials. And it is in these times of trials that James encourages the Christians.

But it was still hard. It was hard for the Christians. I'm sure they felt like giving up. Giving up the hope that in God salvation comes. And therefore, in today's assigned reading from this letter, James says "Be patient,

beloved." Oh, to be patient. To keep the faith. To not lose hope. These are virtues that are formed and exist only when they are tested. If I always get what I want, when I want, then I cannot claim to know if I have patience as a character in me. If I have no disappointments and every good thing I expect happens, then I cannot claim that I keep the faith without losing hope. It is only when I'm in times of uncertainty, doubt, and fear that I can know if I have these virtues.

James uses the analogy of farming to make his point about being patient. Farmers who plant the seeds wait. They wait for the precious crop from the earth. Something good will come from the soil. However, they needed to be patient for the early and late rains. The timing of the rains is beyond the farmer's control. Yet, they know when to expect it, they know when it's near. Likewise, James tells them to be patient for God's coming. He says "See, the Judge is standing at the doors!"

When my daughter was a toddler, I remember telling other young parents, "Oh there's nothing that teaches patience like raising a child." Raising a child means developing patience that you thought never existed in you. Every successful parent is a saint in some ways in that respect.

However, I had no idea what waiting patiently meant, until I discovered the depths of my immigration paperwork. From attorneys, to immigration inspection, to administration processes, to government shutdowns, to the COVID pandemic delays, and to unknown mysterious delays: it took years and years of patient waiting just to know whether we will be permitted to

stay in this country or if we need to pack our bags are restart like back in India. Suspended in that uncertainty we waited and waited. How do you plan a life in limbo? To say it was a difficult time is an understatement. And yet, that day came. For us the patient expectant waiting bore fruit.

Many of us are patiently waiting for God to break into our lives and world. We wait for expectations to bear fruit. As we wait for Christmas this third Sunday of Advent, know that God is standing at the doors. God is coming. Salvation is coming.

Yet, it may not be easy to be sure if God has come. The greatest of the prophets, John the Baptist, wasn't sure too. He had heard about Jesus and had even baptized Jesus. He knew Jesus was special and had pointed his disciples to Jesus. He must be aware of the teachings of Jesus. But as he sat in his prison cell, John the Baptist needed to be sure. In the prison he must have heard of the popularity of Jesus. Jesus was becoming a star. Had God come to God's people? In a trying time, he seeks for certainty. And so he sends his followers to Jesus with the question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John the Baptist had been waiting. He had been waiting with hope. With hope he was preparing the people to repent and eagerly expect God to break into their world to bring deliverance and salvation. "Are you the one... or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus must have smiled and then he tells John's followers: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Jesus tells: John, salvation has come. Deliverance has come. Wholeness and flourishing has come.

Jesus was using the language of the prophet Isaiah. The prophet in today's reading from the book of Isaiah says: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." In his time Isaiah was giving hope to the people of Judah reminding them that salvation was coming. To Judah, which was being battered in war and living through destruction and defeat, Isaiah proclaims: "He will come and save you."

"He will come and save you." God will come and save you!

While we wait for Christmas, we trust that God will come and save us. This waiting may be hard. This faith may be too hard for one who is giving up. The letter of James reminds us: "Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." We pray for God to strengthen our hearts if we're giving up.

So even as we wait, we have a task. We have a task to strengthen our hearts, but we also have a task to help our fellow humans. Look around. Encourage others. Give hope to others. The prophet Isaiah says: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!'

Fellow believers, "Be strong, do not fear!" for God is coming. Christmas is coming. Amen.