

Sermon | The Third Sunday of Advent

1 Thessalonians, Isaiah 61, John 1 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusunur | December 17, 2023

There was a crisis of faith in the newly formed Christian community in Thessalonica. They had put their faith in Jesus Christ, were persevering in the face of persecution, eagerly expecting that Christ would come at any moment and bring salvation and deliverance. But this wait for the arrival of Christ as Lord and King was proving too long. Their loved ones were dying, and they were not sure what would happen to those faithful who died before Christ eventually came. Was there any hope for their dead?

This may not seem like a big problem to us, but we must remember that this was happening just a decade or so after Jesus' death and resurrection. The events of Jesus had happened in the lifetime of these Christians, and they strongly believed the culmination of it all- Christ's coming back in power, would happen within their lifetime.

Paul writes to them and tells them- do not worry. Christ will come and when he comes both the faithful living and dead will experience God's salvation.

But when is this going to happen? Paul writes that the arrival of God would be at a completely unexpected time! "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." And so, he encourages them to be watchful and wait.

These past three Sundays at the lighting of the Advent wreath we've been singing the song, Wait for the Lord. "Wait for the Lord, whose day is near. Wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart."

Advent is a season of waiting and preparing for the coming of God into our world and into our lives. But like the Thessalonians it might feel that the wait for God's salvation is taking too long.

Like the Psalmist we might say: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" Or like the prophet Habakkuk we might ask: "How long, O Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen! "Violence is everywhere!" I cry, but you do not come to save." Habakkuk asks God "when will you come to save?"

Wherever Habakkuk looked he saw evil. May I indulge you in his extended complaint since his words seem such an apt description of our times. Habakkuk says: "Must I forever see these evil deeds? Why must I watch all this misery? Wherever I look, I see destruction and violence. I am surrounded by people who love to argue and fight. The law has become paralyzed, and there is no justice in the courts. The wicked far outnumber the righteous, so that justice has become perverted."

The prophet's question is: Where is God? When will God come?

It is true that the season of Advent is a season of waiting and preparing. But we need to make sure that we see this season in its proper liturgical context. It would be a grave error to think that the laser focus on God's future arrival or coming implies that God for the time being is fundamentally absent from the world. Is God ever truly absent from God's creation? A creation which God sustains every moment?

To the prophet's question "Where is God? When will God come?" God responds to Habakkuk "Look around at the nations; look and be amazed! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn't believe even if someone told you about it."

God was already present and doing something. While Habakkuk looked around and saw evil and chaos, God asks him to look around again and notice the work of salvation.

It seems to me that when we talk of God's coming in Advent, there is an important underlying aspect to it. Since God is never absent from God's creation, the waiting and preparation in Advent may be more about the opening of our eyes and hearts to experience the coming of God into our world. It is the preparation to see God's salvation coming, a salvation that is already at work. Maybe not in ways we had thought, but certainly in ways that bring about salvation for us and the world.

The same is what happened in the time of Jesus. The people were expectantly waiting for the arrival of a messiah, an anointed one, a political leader and king. That was the expectation of how God would come. But Jesus' focus was on fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy: "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners." So even if the people had seen Jesus, heard Jesus, walked around with Jesus, it's understandable that many could still have missed that God's salvation was already in their world.

And that's exactly what John the Baptist says in today's gospel reading. John says, "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me." "I myself did not know him, but I

came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

Jesus was already in their midst during John's ministry, but neither John, nor his followers, nor his critics knew that salvation had already entered their world. John did not know that Jesus--through whom all things in creation came into being--was already among them. The Baptist needed divine enlightenment to see Jesus as the salvation that God had promised.

This Advent may be a preparation for us for the opening of our hearts and mind. An enlightening where we see the coming of God and God's salvation into our and other's lives. Looking within and around and finding God's salvation already at work and participating in that work.

The expectant hope for God's salvation coming in the community in Thessalonica was not in vain, for in some ways God was already there in the Holy Spirit and in the love that the community exhibited. And that is why even while the community waited for God's ultimate salvation, Paul could say "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances."

Advent preparation is about making true for us and others, what is already true in some ways. This preparation may need some 'making straight the way of the Lord'. Clearing the obstacles and hindrances that keep us and others from experiencing God's grace and love.

May our gracious God, who is able and willing to help us through this time of waiting and preparation, lead us to paths of salvation and wholeness for all. Amen.