

St James United Church



Message for December 3, 2023 First Sunday in Advent

“Actively Waiting” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-11 and Luke 1:26-38.

As we enter December each year, many of us shift into a holiday mood. As we deck the halls of our homes like we did here yesterday, there is usually a spirit of joyful anticipation in the air. It's still there this December, but there is another feeling too that I feel. It comes with the collapse of the truce between Israel and Hamas and the ongoing war in Ukraine, the concerns at COP 28 and the news that the host may have used negotiations to secure oil deals despite the climate crisis, a housing crisis in Canada, here in St. John's, with levels of government in a stalemate over how best to help the folks in the tent city, a spate of gun incidents, including one here on Sunday. I'm left anxious, not so much waiting for festivities to start as for another shoe to drop.

I sense similar anxiety in the portion of Isaiah we heard as people cry for God to come help them. They're in a crisis in these last chapters of this prophetic book. Those who'd been exiled to Babylon have been allowed to return home with permission of the Persians. They came with much hope, given supplies to rebuild the Temple along with the community. But now it all seems to be falling apart, like God has abandoned them. Hence calling on God to tear heaven like a garment. You do this as a sign of penitence. It's a cheeky suggestion that God sinned by leaving them to their devices. They know that's not really true as they call God their father. Just the same the anguish is real. The temple rebuild isn't going as they hoped. It's causing conflict over who can be the new generation of priests. And they're arguing over whether those who had been left behind in Judah and married foreigners are still Judeans, a fight that will continue with the Samaritans in Jesus' day. Like ours, theirs is a time of crisis and anxiety.

And yet in the midst of their disappointment they still cry out to God. What I hear in this is less that God should be repentant than that God should share in their disappointment and sorrow, the tearing of your garments a sign of grief as much as repentance. They want God to be in solidarity with them in their crisis, and God is. In fact, God repeatedly joins us in our grief, choosing to be in solidarity again and again. It's what we hear in Exodus as God speaks to Moses and empowers him to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt. And as we hear in our gospel, five hundred years after our Isaiah reading, Gabriel went to Nazareth to tell Mary she'd be part of a new liberating mission, one for the whole world through the birth of a child. Jesus, she is told, will be conceived through God's power, making him holy, a son of God. Talk about God coming to us in solidarity, doing so when Judea was occupied by Rome, a time of suffering for many like when Moses was called, as critical as when Isaiah spoke his prophecies. Thankfully, Mary agreed to God's request.

And she did so despite her own anxiety. She had good reason to be confused by Gabriel, shocked at the request. What she was being asked put her in grave danger, at the very least put her at risk of being expelled from her family, more likely of being killed, either way her life lost so that the honour of her family might be restored. But despite the risk she says yes, yes when she is told that her elderly cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant. She knew she would have someone to share the experience, someone with whom to share support. She understands this, I believe, because of her social location. Young, female, unmarried in a world which favoured none of these identities, she didn't give undue weight to her ability, something that can hold us back from seeking help when we need it. Mary understood the power of being there for others, so agreed to be an instrument of God being in solidarity with us, knowing someone would be in solidarity with her.

In this we see God's plan for the world, a plan beyond Jesus' life and ministry, a plan which includes each and every one of us who is his disciple. At this time of year, we rightly think of his birth, even as the readings of the next two weeks are set decades after it, and those traditionally set for the First Sunday of Advent are focused on his future return in glory to usher in God's Reign of justice and peace and so sweep away all of the issues that bring us such anxiety. Though we will soon celebrate how Jesus was born two millennia ago, remember that he is also born in us, present to the world in and through each other, especially as we share his love, mercy, and justice, and so respond in hope to the source of our anxieties. This is possible because as Isaiah reminds us, God is the potter and we are the clay, an allusion to Adam's creation in God's image. As then, so are we now, capable of bearing God's grace in our lives. Christ is born in each of our hearts, even more so as we work together in his name. He is made known as we model our lives after him, his grace strengthened as we seek him in prayer, and his presence multiplied in us as a community as we share communion, empowered to nurture the gift of community in our world.

In this we join Mary as she bore Jesus into the world. Her response, though initially anxious, was one of hope. Hope is about waiting. But not waiting passively just accepting what comes. Instead, we wait actively, like a pregnant mother who is staying healthy as her child grows within her, a couple who is getting the nursery ready, along with all the supplies they will need, a family who is getting set to help the parents when the little one comes along. That's active waiting. That is what we are to be about even as we face so many anxious situations, not throwing up our hands but joining others in seeking peace, in mitigating climate change, in advocating for housing, in combatting gun violence, knowing that as we do, Christ is with us, his love born through us.

So beloved, let us keep actively waiting in this anxious Advent, anticipating more than festive celebrations, anticipating God's Reign of solidarity made present through the way we reach out to others, made manifest in the love, peace and compassion we share. Amen.