

St James United Church

Message for December 10, 2023
Second Sunday in Advent



“Watching for God” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

Last week we reflected on the anxiety many of us feel this Advent, and how this season is a celebration of God's response to that, Jesus' birth a way by which God has come to be with us, in solidarity with us in our sorrows as well as joys. This is not just in the past. God continues to be present with others right now through us, birthing God's Reign through our love.

It's a reminder that we aren't alone in this world, nor can we be, despite what our culture tells us. None of us is solely responsible for our successes, or our shortcomings for that matter. By birth and upbringing, we're part of a family, community, a network of relationships. God works through these, bringing us the help we need, or based on our first reading, making a straight path for us to start over. God promised to do this for the exiles and brought them home through Cyrus, King of Persia. Like most Near Eastern monarchs, he's imaged as a shepherd, so it is through Cyrus that God shepherds the people, comforting them like lambs held to his heart.

This speaks to how we are in covenant with God but live it out with each other. It is the heart of both Torah and Gospel, yet we know too well in 2022 and into 2023 how that can break down as we focus on ourselves more than others. Even though we think that it was somehow better in biblical times, this situation is I believe something John and Jesus could relate to. They were born under Roman rule, their homeland occupied by a foreign army. The soldiers were there to back the king who ruled at Rome's behest, but the system only worked because the king was also backed up by landowners, merchants and the like. These leaders accepted Roman rule and foreign occupation because it enabled them to get ahead, to feather their own nest at the expense of others. Most of the people were really struggling, barely surviving at all, but that didn't matter to the top tier. They had Torah but ignored their responsibility to others under it.

This is the context in which John put on camelhair like Elijah did nine hundred years prior when the king of that time was also backed by foreigners and pretty near everyone had broken the covenant as they worshipped other gods. Seeing a repeat of that time in his own, John went into the wilderness and called people to be baptized in the Jordan after confessing their sins. We don't give baptism much thought, but John was doing something innovative to his people. He invited both women and men to perform a *mikveh*. This is a ritual bath of purification for women, but men only take part in a *mikveh* when they convert to Judaism. John was effectively saying, “You may be God's people, but you're acting as if you are Gentiles and so worshipping other gods. Confess your sins and return to God. Confess your failure to each other and renew your covenant not just with God but renew you covenant with your community.”

John did this, we are told, to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus. In this moment, I feel John is telling us the same, inviting us to get spiritually ready for Christmas through reflection and, dare I say, confession. We often think of such preparation in regard to Lent, approaching Advent more as a season of waiting, of hope. But when Advent first began, it was a time when people prepared for baptism at Epiphany, like they do in Lent for baptisms at Easter. So why not do some reflective soul searching once again? As I shared last week, the hope we have for God's Reign isn't passive. We are part of what God is up to in making the crooked way straight, which means being aware of those places where we can share love, seek peace, work for justice. And as much as I want to believe I'm always doing this, I'm not. I need to be intentional and reflect on my life, to acknowledge where I haven't been loving, justice-seeking, peaceful, but created unrest, been hurtful, have pulled people from rather than toward each other. Where I see these things, I need to not just ask God for forgiveness but others too.

This honest stock-taking is a way to take to heart what Christmas celebrates, the Incarnation, God-with-us revealed in and through Jesus. But as I shared last week, God's coming to us in Christ didn't stop with him two thousand years ago. We're each an expression of that interface between God and the world, Christ present in and through us, and in and through others. I do not always act on that, and so here too I am called to reflect, to examine where I'm caught in ways of seeing the world which treat some as more deserving of respect and care than others, forgetting how God is present not just in me but my neighbour, a stranger, an enemy. We see this at play in Israel and Gaza and other conflicts. We dehumanize our enemy to justify hurting them. Sometimes we need to step back to see them again, as God sees them, but this means clearing the muck out of our eyes, and being honest that there is muck there in the first place.

It's really about the second aspect of Advent we're reflecting on, watching for Christ's coming. And what do you do when keeping watch? You scan the horizon, looking for changes that tell you something is happening, someone is coming. If as I said, we are all part of God's interface with the world, then God is at work. We just need to be watching for it and then come alongside whoever is sharing love, seeking peace, working for justice, and amplify it. It doesn't need to be complicated. It could be as simple as a practice in Amsterdam where poets participate in funerals that would otherwise be unattended, having written a poem based on whatever was known about the person's life. It's about affirming their humanity. The idea has spread to other cities in Europe, and I'd love to see it happen here. It could be one more thing that God is up to as people help and care for others, like the Autism Society's dinner on Christmas Day for folks who will be alone, or the work of Stella's Circle and our sharing in it on this White Gift Sunday. But to come alongside others in this, we need to recognize God at work in them, and to acknowledge where we are impeding in see this as well.

I realize my reflection hits harder than last week's as Mary said yes to God. But heeding John's invitation to prepare ourselves spiritually is part of the same message. If we are called to birth God's love in the world, we need to be honest where we aren't. So, let's keep watch for God at work and watch what needs to change for love to grow. Amen.