

Third Sunday of Advent  
Wicker Park Lutheran Church  
Vicar Paul Eldred  
December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How are you all doing this morning? I ask because I know that this can be a difficult time of year for many people. This can be a time of business and stress: Presents have to be bought, the days are getting ever darker, and there are those sometimes awkward work holiday parties to attend. And I know that for some people, the holidays are a painful reminder of absent loved ones. At seminary, the stress has been off the charts recently thanks to finals and the end of the semester. Or maybe you're just not a fan of snow and woke up to a nice layer of it this morning. Some have said that the year of 2016 has been an especially difficult time to deal with. This year has been characterized with the deaths of beloved celebrities, numerous mass shootings or incidents of violence, and an especially nasty campaign and election. For whatever reason, I know that this time of year it can be hard to be in the Christmas spirit that's been pervasive in media and in retail stores for weeks now. It can be hard to find the joy that we've been told we should feel.

Perhaps this is why Advent is one of my favorite seasons of the year – when the world around us is at its most hectic with shopping, parties, and trudging through snow, the church takes time to intentionally slow down, remember what is important in life, and look towards Christ’s coming. In the midst of a world that shifts attention from one crisis to the next, running from one store to the other, or is forced to navigate the commute home from work with slippery roads and freshly fallen snow, Advent gives us a much needed message of hope that seems to come out of nowhere. It’s a message I always find myself craving this time of year. A reminder to slow down and be aware of God’s presence in my life. To think about family and friends and be thankful for their love. To have hope in God and remind myself that I will make it through my shopping list and papers and holiday travel.

The message we hear from the Prophet Isaiah this morning is also an unexpected word of hope. At this point in the book, Isaiah has been warning his people of the dark times ahead. Isaiah tells the people that the foreign empires will conquer their lands and take their people into exile. He gives vivid language about the impending disaster – really a lot of fire and brimstone talk – to tell his people how terrible these things will be.

And then, out of nowhere, comes these words of hope: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom... it shall

blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing...[God] will come and save you.” On the eve of impending doom, Isaiah gives his people a vision of hope – of God’s saving presence with them. A vision where creation itself is transformed from lament into song. This is a message that recognizes the reality of the world around them but gives God’s vision for the future. Isaiah does not try to hide the calamity that is about to happen, but he tells the people that even when they have been conquered by foreign armies and are taken away in exile, God will be with them and will lead them back to Jerusalem. God will create a holy highway that will go from where the people are and lead them home and into the presence of God.

Isaiah makes it clear that this is a road for all people to travel – all ages, all ability levels, all of God’s people will be on this road and God will travel with them to protect them from all danger. Isaiah is even nice enough to say that you can’t get lost on the road – not even the most directionally challenged person will need a GPS because God will lead them. This is the royal highway that God has prepared to bring God’s people home in joy and in peace. And while the people may be despairing now, Isaiah foretells this time when they will be singing, dancing, and shouting for joy. It’s this same expansive vision of love for all people that is enacted in Jesus’ life and ministry.

And this morning, we reenacted part of Isaiah's vision of hope. We gathered in the fellowship hall and followed the cross as we walked along the way that had been prepared for us. We saw how our baptismal waters spring forth in the wildernesses of our despair and our sins. We did this to remind ourselves that Isaiah's message also speaks to us today as well, here and now. We too walk on this Holy Way and God brings us here, to hear God's message of hope, to sing and rejoice, and to eat at the table prepared for us a feast where Christ himself is host. Isaiah speaks words of hope to us in this assembly and to all people who are struggling to find that hope – not only to the frantic shopper, the weary traveler, or the one missing loved ones, but also to those living under oppression, those living with mental illness or addiction, and those whose lives are surrounded by violence. Isaiah reminds us that God's message of hope is for all people. Advent reminds us that God will come again and again to be with the people who need God's presence most – that Jesus, God incarnate, will take on our mortal frame with all its brokenness and imperfections and live among us as one of us.

I recently heard of an ELCA congregation that decided to do away with Advent this year. They reasoned that since the secular world is already celebrating Christmas, they should too. That by the time the twelve days of Christmas start on December 25, the rest of the culture has already shifted their

attention to something else. So to join in the festive celebrations that are surrounding us, this congregation has skipped Advent and moved directly into Christmas. While I understand where they are coming from, I am so grateful for Advent – this time of countercultural contemplation while everyone else tells us are told to celebrate. A time of slowing down when the world speeds up. A time to prepare ourselves for what is ahead. A time of earnest hope that leads into the palpable joy of Christmas when we hear that remarkable gospel message that Immanuel, God with us, has come and that God dwells with God's people.

As we live into the season that surrounds us, let this be your message of Advent hope: as we await God's assured coming in our lives we can confidently know that God *is* with us and *will* bring us home on the royal highway – and God will live with us and we will live in God forever.

Thanks be to God!