

Third Sunday of Advent

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Matthew James

December 16th, 2018

Grace, peace, and mercy to you from the One who is, who was, and who is to come.
Amen.

What would happen if God interrupted us? If this coming we talk about with some regularity actually happened, without notice as predicted? What in our world would change? What fears would be dispelled? What injustices overturned?

Those aren't my own questions, but those of a theologian, Anne Stewart, who, I believe poses them perfectly. I believe each and every one of us is all too aware of the great injustices that are rampant in this world today. The evils. The real and present fear that we live in today, whatever your political persuasion may be. And without fail, just when the violence, the brokenness of our world seems to be getting beyond our comprehension, something even more incomprehensible happens, even if it's the frequency with which reports of shootings, hate-filled diatribes, you-name-it occur. These words of a friend of mine have stuck with me: It's not hard to fear today. It's not hard to be angry at the visceral back and forth in today's politics. And on top of real fears of environmental degradation; violence all around us; We hear from even our elected leaders what we 'should' be afraid of as well; People coming from the wrong countries seeking a safe place from.. well their own fear.. oppression and violence in their own countries.

Yes, fear, real and imagined, is all around us. And so, John the Baptist words seem all too appropriate for us today.. As difficult as it might be to identify the brood of vipers. But is this how we really believe life should be in our world? That fear, rampant examples of unjust practices of those who don't fit into a narrow category of the 'ideal' human... Christian?

Endless consumption of resources that leave our planet, our home, in ruins. Even more confounding, we hear John the Baptist's difficult words during advent. And on a Sunday traditionally called Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday for rejoicing. This is a day to rejoice. But rejoice in what? What have we really to rejoice in? Well it IS advent.

Seeing, hearing, knowing that we Christians, let alone humankind today, seems to be far, far from any reason for rejoicing in much of anything. What really are we to rejoice in?

Well it IS advent. It IS the season of expectation, and preparation, and hope. The Lord your God is in your midst. God will rejoice over you with gladness, God will renew you in God's love.

These words, these words of the prophet Zephaniah also came a time of despair for God's people/ The despair of a people who continued to live under oppression and occupation of a conquering nation. Who thought there was no way out; there was no turning around. But Zephaniah was compelled by God to speak. To speak that in the end, God is not a God of judgement, but a God of restoration. And so yes, hope. Hope in a God who is indeed interrupting. Who is doing a new thing in our world; a new thing with this creation. And we return to that other prophet, John, in our gospel. John, you may recall, was prepared to have a tough go at it. We hear in Matthew's account that he was dressed funny. Hung out with... well no one really. He ate weird things. Said even weirder things. So, in order to assure his credibility, his parents, faithful and patient Zechariah and Elizabeth, were instructed that he should drink no 'strong drink'. So he could never be accused of being under the influence. So this weird, probably wild haired guy comes along, interrupting people's way of life. Proclaiming the need for repentance. For turning away from the old ways. So that we, so that those who might hear, might be prepared. So that the world might be ready for a new way. For a new light, a new path with God. And John's words struck a chord with the crowds. People were even ready to label him the Messiah. Yet even he was not the one for whom we wait, even with all our attention drawn to him. Even while we wait, and watch.. and hope this Advent..

The truth is God is breaking in through us, into this world. This, God, who came to us; who came into the world beyond what the world expected. Not even in the words and ministry of the prophet John. But behind him, quietly. In the back alley. (if there were one in those days)

Who came in the midst of crisis of poverty and displacement. This was God. And this is our reason for this Third Sunday in Advent. That, in the midst of judgement, war, death, dissention, God is here; God is begging to interrupt our lives. And God will not step back from the promise, the assurance that God, in Christ, will come again to renew this broken creation. This is what the day is for. Joy in that promise. Now in the presence of Christ here with us today, and joy with the promise that Christ will be here with us tomorrow. And the next day, and the next month, and the next year.

And so that question posed by our friend the scholar. What would it be like? How might we live our lives knowing that Christ is coming, Christ's presence among us not a far-off fantasy, but may come upon us immediately. Tomorrow, Today?

How would the world change? The people listening to John might wonder the same thing, so they ask, "What then should we do?"

When you have more of anything that you need, two coats for instance; share. When you are filled to the brim with good food, feed. Live your life as though there is abundance, and there will be abundance. A couple years ago in Malden, Massachusetts, near where I served my first call, there were reports of hats and gloves and socks appearing tied to trees around the town. With notes that these items were not lost, but for anyone who needed them. At first, it was a mystery who was doing this until it was discovered it was a local woman who heard of people doing this in New York City and she thought it sounded like something she could do. And the folks in New York City started doing it after hearing of people in Calgary who were doing the same thing. They were helping people on the street, or anyone without enough clothing to stay warm, prepare for another cold winter.

Perhaps Christ's imminent return was not a part of any of these individual motivation. But, implicitly, at least, they were heeding the instruction, John's command to share out of what they had, out of abundance with those who had none. This is the reason to rejoice. Despite the messages that surround us today. In the midst of worry and doubt and uncertainty. Our response is not, must not be to wall ourselves off, to hole away what is ours so that it will stay ours. but to believe, to live, to reflect the reality that God is in our midst! This is the joy that we celebrate this day- indeed, every day of our lives. To know that we are cradled with God. To believe that we, yes we, become a sign of God's hope, God's interrupting our world. To live out Christ's love for all people. WE rejoice in the anticipation and watch and prepare. Prepare for God to be in our midst, To fully present, here today, tomorrow, and forever. in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.