

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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November 26, 2023

Before I begin, I want to offer everyone – but especially parents – a content warning. In my sermon I'm going to talk about the war in Palestine and tell a few stories that have been in the news recently. Parents have to make decisions about how much or how little they talk about these issues with or around their children, and if you find that it's best for you or your family to step out, the nursery is open to you downstairs and the fellowship hall just over there is open as well.

But for those who stay, I want to emphasize something. This is a globe of the earth. This is where we are, in Chicago, in America. And the war is happening all the way over here, in Palestine. So even though this war is very close to our hearts right now, it is physically very far away. We are all safe, and we are not in any physical danger.

Okay! So last week in Sunday School we were talking about parables, and why exactly Jesus needs to use parables to explain what the kingdom of heaven is like. Wouldn't it be easier if he just... said what will be there? What it will be like for us? Why do we need all these metaphors – “the kingdom of heaven is *like* a mustard seed,” “the kingdom of heaven is *like* a merchant searching for pearls,” “the kingdom of heaven is *like* a woman baking bread.”

And the reality is that we need parables because we just can't understand what the kingdom of heaven is like without them. You couldn't explain in plain language what it will be like because even our wildest dreams do not stretch far enough. Our language doesn't have enough words, our eyes can't see enough colors, our lives don't have enough years to understand the depths of God's love, the breadth of God's mercy, the incredible abundance that will be present in the kingdom of heaven. **

So that puts us in kind of an odd place, right? We have this thing we are dreaming about, and when we try to catch it, to see it clearly, we just see shadows. We see through a mirror dimly, as Paul would say. We have to use the word 'hope' when we talk about the future of creation because we don't know, for sure, how everything will go down. We know that one day will be the last day, and then all the hunger will be gone, and all the pain, and all the sorrow, and all the worry, and all that will remain is love. But we don't totally know how we're going to get there... or how much longer we have to wait.

And while we wait... the calendar marches on. So here we are again, in Advent. Today is the third Sunday of Advent. This is the time of the church year where we are supposed to be thinking about the incoming reign of heaven, where God will usher in a time of peace, of love, of justice. To usher in shalom, to usher in that peace that is truer and deeper than we can even understand.

And yet... I have to admit, I feel sick. And I'm angry with God. I'm angry about this completely sick and twisted reality where we just, on Thursday, celebrated with friends and family the anniversary of a genocide. I feel sick

looking at these beautiful wreaths and the twinkling lights and the Christmas music on the radio and thinking about all the children who have been buried alive in the rubble of the holy land. Maybe you're feeling it too... that tension in your muscles that never quite goes away these days. The both/and of looking towards God's kingdom and hoping against hope and trying to love and trying to live in accordance with God's will and yet also keeping our eyes open to the pain of the world and bearing it in our hearts... it's unbearable. It's so painful.

That's why so many of us... we have this self-protective instinct that kicks in. We don't watch the news. We hear something new about Ukraine or Syria or Palestine and we turn away.

Right now, I'm going to talk a little bit about the war. I'm going to ask you to hang in there.

Since October 7th, airstrikes by the Israeli military have led to the deaths of fifty-five hundred (5,500) children. This number does not include adults. Only children. Hundreds more children are currently missing. The overall death toll, as reported by Israel and the United Nations, is 13,000. One out of every 150 people in Gaza. 13,000 people dead in six weeks.

Right now, Israel and Palestine are in a planned ceasefire. The ceasefire is going to last four days, and during those four days, about fifty Israeli hostages will be released by Hamas, and about a hundred and fifty Palestinian women and children will be released from Israeli prisons. Once those people are back in their countries, the Israeli minister of defense has

said he will continue to fight “forcefully” – that’s a quote – for the foreseeable future.

I read a story this week about a mom in Palestine. Her name is Sara al-Khalidi. Since October 7th they’ve been able to hear bombing every night, but one night earlier this week, the explosions never stopped. They just kept going, uninterrupted. In the morning Sara saw that most of the homes in her neighborhood had been destroyed by missile strikes, so she took her children to her cousin’s house in the south end of the city. And when she got there her cousin was writing her children’s names on their bodies using a sharpie, so that when they died, they could be returned to their families instead of buried in mass graves. So, the world will know who they are.

That is the situation. Oh, dear people. The inbreaking of the kingdom of heaven feels so very far away.

Sometimes we play this game in church. This game of suspended disbelief. We pretend every Advent that we don’t know the savior will be born on Christmas. We pretend every Lent that we don’t know Jesus will be crucified on Friday and risen on Sunday. This game of pretending – it’s because sometimes we think of the incarnation of God on earth as being a historical event, locked in time, two thousand years ago. And likewise, we think of the resurrection of Christ as a historical event, locked in time, two thousand years ago.

But dear people, our text today from the gospel of Matthew tells us that Christ is among us now. Jesus said, “Whatever you do for the least of these, you

do for me.” The crucifixion of Christ is indeed happening now, by the thousands. Every little body buried under rubble is the body of Christ, beloved God, truly incarnate.

The story of Sara’s cousins, neighbors and friends – that is the story of Christ crucified. And unfortunately, the war between Israel and Palestine is only one of the many death-dealing forces active in this world this day. There are the forces that perpetuate hunger and thirst. Forces that strip us bare, imprison us, and sicken us. Forces that demean us, that isolate us, that tell us we are worthless. Forces that keep neighbors estranged. Forces that allow us to turn away from the reality of Christ crucified, over and over, in this world today. It feels like we’re living in this perpetual Holy Saturday, doesn’t it? Always in the still-waiting, not-there-yet?

But dear people, just as the crucifixion of Christ is happening now, so too is the resurrection of Christ.

That is the meaning of Advent – which we signify by lighting a new flame on this wreath every week. Those flames represent the promise that our God is indeed drawing nearer to us, and that even at in the middle of the darkest night, there at the horizon we can see the dawn breaking. Indeed, the promise of God shown through the resurrected Christ is the promise to be present in the hardest times and in the most unexpected ways.

This morning, in our second reading, we heard Paul’s student write to the people in Ephesus, “I pray that you will receive revelation as you come to know God.” What he means is that every encounter we have with God

fundamentally changes us. It changes who we are, and it changes our orientation to the world. It changes what we see and what we seek. The reason we have Advent every year – the reason we aren't a one-and-done church where Christmas and Easter are historical events – is because every time we reach Advent, we are different people. Newly able to understand the meaning of the incarnation, newly able to bear witness to the crucifixions of this world, newly able to recognize the shining lights of resurrection, newly able to imagine – just a bit, through a mirror dimly – what the kingdom of heaven will be like.

In these next few moments of meditation, let us reflect on how we have been changed since last Advent. What stories or situations have you encountered this past year that have changed you? Where have you noticed the presence of God in your life lately? Where might you be an incarnation of God's love in someone else's life?