

Mooretown Presbyterian Churches

November 27, 2022

First Sunday of Advent: Hope



God calls us to worship

Advent reading and candle lighting (*Insert*)

Song: **A candle is burning, a flame warm and bright,
A candle of hope in December's dark night.
While angels sing blessings from heaven's dark sky,
Our hearts we prepare now for Jesus is nigh.**

We respond in praise, confession, and supplication

Prayer of Praise:

Almighty and everlasting God,
You hold all our days in your hands,
and embrace us in your everlasting arms.
In a tired and violent world, you are hope.
In a hectic and busy world, you are peace.
In a cold world, you are comfort.
In Jesus Christ, you bring love into this world,
and call us to embody his love in all we do and say.
In our worship this day,
we offer you our love and loyalty,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Make us one in worship and service,
so that the world will see your hope at work in us and through us,
making all things new. Amen

Prayer of Confession (Unison):

**God of hope,
we confess that we often prefer
accepting half-truths and pleasing ideas,
rather than your challenging word.
We praise our own cleverness rather than your wisdom.
We have exploited others for our benefit
and used the earth without a thought for its wellbeing.
In your mercy,**

**forgive what we have been
amend who we are,
and direct who we shall be.
For the sake of your kingdom,
and in the name of Jesus the Christ,
Amen.**

Assurance of pardon:

Hear and believe the good news: God forgives what we have confessed and offers us new life in Christ. Trust in the hope that you are forgiven and that, with God, new things are possible.

Hymn: #109 "All earth is waiting"

God speaks to us

Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122 (*read responsively*)
Matthew 24:36-44
Romans 13:11-14

Watching in the days of Noah

1. Isaiah's words are words of hope to be sure.

When all nations look to the mountain of the Lord's house as the locale of all that is good and holy, when the peoples of the nations *yearn* to learn the ways of Yahweh, when they engage in *learning* His teachings and by them *discern* the ways that are from God from the ways that are not, then shall be the cessation of all that is violent and unholy. When all people are yearning, learning, and discerning the ways of God, tools of destruction will be dismantled and rebuilt as tools of growth and provision.

Imagine all the resources and material that go into building tanks and warships, drones and fighter jets used to build greenhouses and ploughs, emergency shelters and homes!

That is a beautiful vision and, indeed, it is woven into the picture of the age to come when Christ returns, the dead are resurrected and all of creation rightly glorifies God.

That is the hope of Christ's second Advent.

We live between that time that's yet to be and his first Advent 2,000 years ago.

In this present age sin, death, and the devil – although they have been defeated by Christ's cross, yet still vie for control of our thoughts, words, and deeds.

And, sometimes without our awareness, they can get the upper hand.

The first part of Isaiah is set in the years before the Babylonian exile. The leaders of Judah, unaware of their plight, were leading God's people – and indeed God's very city – toward destruction.

This wasn't something that happened overnight. As one generation learned from the previous, the people were led farther along the trajectory of what Isaiah identified as their two-fold sin: they were loving neither their neighbours nor God.

Caring for widows and orphans has always been a prerogative of God's people. People caring for people is a critical part of God's good creation. It's what the second tablet of commandments is all about. And it's especially important for those who are the most vulnerable members of society. But, encouraged by the action of their leaders, the

people were pre-occupied with their self-serving living rather than looking to the needs of the most vulnerable:

*Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them.¹*

God's second accusation was of spiritual adultery.

Like diluted wine, they had watered down their devotion to Yahweh.

*Ah, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who deal corruptly,
who have forsaken the LORD,
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
who are utterly estranged!²*

So, they were loving neither God nor neighbour and, as we detect when we read the prophets, they were unaware of their circumstance.

They may well have argued that they were still devoted to God, after all, they were still performing the rituals, in chapter 1 as elsewhere throughout this book, God drew attention to their worship practices and condemned them as abominable:

*What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.*

*When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.³*

¹ Isaiah 1:22-23

² Isaiah 1:4

³ Isaiah 1:11-12

Unaware of sin's persistence, their love of God had become adulterated by their love of idols as well as by the love of their own comfort and pleasure. They yearned not for God's ruling, nor did they seek to learn God's teachings, and they cared not to discern God's ways.

2. Now, in our age, I think you could make the case that, with exceptions and with imperfections, we are making strides in loving our neighbours.

As the church, we do what we can to love our neighbours. When someone is in need, we will do what we can to meet that need. We do our best to share our resources through PWS&D and food bank collections.

Individually, many people are generous with time, talent, and resources.

Our tax accountant once told Hannah and me that often her clients will get audited. She handles a lot of accounts for people who are Christian and Christians tend to give away a lot of money relative to their income – whether to their church or to other organizations that are working on caring for others – and so, they get audited. The government is suspicious when we give money away!

However, there is a reason the commandments dealing with interpersonal relations come after those dealing with our relationship with God, and why Jesus said the greatest commandment is first to love God then to love neighbours.

The idea is that when we get the first part right, when we *yearn* for God's kingdom, commit to *learning* God's teaching, and when we awaken to our circumstance and *discern* God's ways, we can't help but fulfill the second part.

Jesus described the days of Noah as a time when people were going about their lives: eating and drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage. Maybe they were community-minded people, helping their neighbours however they could. We know, from the story of Noah told in Genesis, that in God's sight – except for Noah himself – the people were evil. Now, here's where the dots connect: from their own perspective, the people probably didn't consider themselves particularly evil! They were simply going about their lives. Yet, they were going about their lives without giving any thought to God.

As long as their needs were met, they didn't yearn for God, they didn't desire to learn his teachings, and they expended little energy in discerning God's ways.

I wonder if we, as a society and maybe even in our private lives, are in a similar situation. If we've reversed the order of the commandments. If we go about our living, doing what we can to help our family, friends, and neighbours, yet in our preoccupations with eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, forsake the Lord.

We strive to do things for the common good, while balking at even mentioning the name of the One who is the source of good.

3. So, says Jesus:

Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.⁴

Two people, both doing their work, both going about their business. One is taken and the other is left.

The difference is that one yearns, learns, and discerns God's ways while the other gives little thought to God.

What Matthew was evoking in this passage is what's called the "rapture."

The rapture describes the time when Christ returns and the faithful – those who have continued in their love of God *and* of neighbour – are taken to meet him.

This is one of those instances where the popular understanding is grossly misconstrued. When the word "rapture" is mentioned, the image that probably comes to mind is of a moment in time when select people spontaneously disappear or shoot up into the clouds in a beam of light never to be seen again while those left behind burn up with the last of a dead earth.

This, I humbly submit, wrong.

God created this earth together with all the tangible, gritty creatures and called it good. Christ came in the first advent and gave his life on the cross for the redemption of us flesh-and-blood creatures. God's not going to suddenly abandon that which He loves. Instead, the Biblical picture of hope is of a new heaven married to a new earth when God

⁴ Matthew 24:41

makes his home once and for all among us mortals and Jesus – the King of kings, rules His good kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

We tend to get preoccupied during the Advent season with Jesus' historical arrival in the incarnation: the enfleshment of God in the baby boy named Jesus who was born 2,000 years ago in a stable in Bethlehem.

Advent is also about his second arrival – when the dead are resurrected, when he judges the living and the dead with holy and perfect justice, and when the world is firmly established as God's home.

When Christ returns – his second advent – the church will indeed be taken. But not to spend eternity in the clouds. Rather, to meet the returning King, join his entourage, and with shouts and rejoicing, usher him to the earth he redeemed there to reign as undisputed King over his kingdom, consummated by the marriage of heaven and earth forever and ever. Amen!

This is our Advent hope.

When the king returns amid the fanfare of his faithful people, then “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

4. When this will happen is not for us to know.

All we can be sure of is that this day of salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers.

Our job is not to predict, but to watch.

...one will be taken and the other will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know what day your Lord is coming.

Watching in the days of Noah doesn't mean sitting on a dock watching the sunrise.

It means living our present days in the certain hope of Christ's promised return.

It means that we not only love our neighbours, but that we first love our God.

*It means that we go about our daily tasks clothed with Christ:
yearning for his kingdom, learning his teachings, and discerning his
ways.*

Now, by way of closing I will point out that everyone who started with us this morning, is still here. Which means that either none of us are worthy of ushering the King to reclaim his kingdom, or (which is more likely) he hasn't yet come.

So, as we enter the season of Advent, let us do so with hope-filled watchfulness:
Yearning, learning, and discerning.

For the good of our societies, the health of our souls, and the glory of God.

Amen.

We respond by affirming our faith, offering our tithes, and prayer:

Choir anthem (St. Andrew's): "A journey just begun"

Offering:

(Offering plates are presented at the Communion Table while congregation sings:)

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

praise him all creatures here below;

praise him above, ye heavenly host;

praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost

Prayer of dedication

The Sacrament of Holy Communion:

Invitation to the Lord's Table

Hymn: #534 "All who hunger" (*Elements are served*)

The Apostle's Creed (*insert*)

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (#564)

The Lord be with you.

And with you also.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give God thanks and praise.

Blessed are you, gracious God,
Creator of light, Giver of life, Source of love.
You guide the sun, cradle the moon, and toss the stars.
At your word, the earth was spun on its course among the planets.
You breathed life into humankind and set us among all your creatures,
in a covenant of love and service.
Even when we turned away from you, you did not forsake us.
You sent your prophets to call us back to you.
We give you thanks for your unending mercy to each and to all,
as we join with the whole creation
to lift our hearts in joyful praise.

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.**

**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

Mighty and tender God,
In Jesus of Nazareth, you revealed your light, your life, and your love
in words that confront and comfort us,
in compassion that heals and frees us,
in hope that challenges and changes us.
We gather at this table to give thanks for his gifts to us.
As we take the bread and cup at the table he prepares for us,
fill us with such longing for your kingdom
that our worship leads us to witness to his love through our lives.

God of hope and healing,
we gather at your table to remember Christ's life and death,
to proclaim his resurrection,
and to await his coming again.
But we also remember those who do not feast in joy today:

We pray for all who are in sorrow, loneliness or pain . . .

(pause)

all who live in fear or hunger or poverty . . . *(pause)*

for nations that struggle for peace and justice . . . *(pause)*

and for world leaders facing the challenges of this present time. . .

(pause)

Inspire in them the hope we know in Christ Jesus as we proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

Now send your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon these gifts of bread and wine, O God,
that all who share this loaf and cup
may be united with Christ and in Christ.

So let us shine the light of your hope into the world you love.

We offer our gifts and ourselves as the Lord taught us, we now pray:

The Lord's Prayer (unison)

The Breaking of Bread

Hear now the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper
as recorded by the apostle Paul:

1st CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

The gifts of God
for the people of God.

The Communion

The body of Christ broken for us.
Eat ye all, of it.

The blood of Christ, the seal of the new covenant.
Drink ye all, of it.

Prayer after communion

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery
in which you have given yourself to us.
Grant that we may go into the world
in the strength of your Spirit,
to give ourselves for others
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

God sends us with God's blessing:

Hymn: #128 "There's a voice in the wilderness crying"

Benediction

Congregational Amen