

At Advent, we look toward the manger scene, while singing songs about what happened long ago and re-telling--again and again--the ancient narrative of the coming of the birth of Jesus. We celebrate during this time of waiting, filled with joy at what God has done, what God is still doing today, and what God will continue to do in the future.

At the core of their religious observance, the people of Israel celebrated, too. They remembered God's faithfulness in their history, but also recognized the presence of God in their midst at that present moment, judging the people and judging the world God had created. The people of Israel saw a God continuing to create and re-shape the world, an ongoing re-creation past, present, and future.

We might be taken off guard by this notion of judgment entering our celebration towards Christmas, but author Beth Tanner reminds us (well, at least those of us who live up north) that the genial warmth of the Advent season "gives way to the long, cold winter," and we should view the season as a good time to "change how we live so that others can live." (*New Proclamation Year B 2012*).

Such a call brings our exultation this morning into coherence with our longing for God's justice and healing and peace, not just for some but for the entire world that God loves so well. On this third Advent Sunday, we look back, but we also look forward and strive to open our eyes to the presence and the workings of God's promises and the unfolding of God's purpose for all of us and the world today just as much as back then. Paul called the Thessalonians but he also calls us and all the world, not just our congregation, not just the wider church, but all the world, all creation, to rejoice as the waiting continues.

We have an appeal, from Paul, to a community of faith about the way we are called to live in the world. The immediate context of this appeal is set in 1 Thessalonians 4 where Paul states that the return of the Lord is near. We know that both Paul and other Christian communities revised that timeline when the Lord did not come as quickly as expected! But perhaps that re-writing of Christian hope is unnecessary if we take seriously other admonitions that Christ can come at any moment, unexpectedly. Then, every moment is truly living in that hope and joy of Christ's imminent arrival.

In the verses directly preceding our text, the structure of the community is addressed (respect and esteem in love towards leaders) as well as behavior (the leaders, in return, encourage, help, are patient, and seek to do good). But now a more general appeal is made to the entire community, an appeal that is the foundation of all previous admonitions and counsel, an appeal that lies at the heart of every Christian life. The way of life together in this community that Paul proposes, stands in opposition to everything that believers experience in their relationship to the world.

We sometimes forget the radical nature of that appeal (do good to all, help the weak, do not repay evil for evil). In Paul's first century context, the standard governing human relationships was different. It was about revenge and pay back, about maintaining and guarding one's respect. I believe we can safely say that it is very much the same today. Paul's appeal challenges this self-centered world, supporting not only a way of life in the community but in openness towards all. This way of life that characterizes the Christian "waiting" (waiting for Jesus' return, waiting during Advent) breaks open the restrictions and restraints of human interaction focused upon the self.

Since the start of my tenure here at FPC, I have made sure to have at least one day for our youth to volunteer at the Brazos Church Pantry during Advent. Now it's important to do mission at any point throughout the year but it's particularly relevant in this time of waiting to joyfully serve those who have need, those for whom the holiday festivities are far from the mind and instead they are worried and in need of sustenance.

We pack food for those who need it and walk with and interact with the people who gratefully receive it. We walk away after a busy hour and a half wanting to do more. We can't wait to get back to serving our fellow brothers and sisters in creation.

This period of waiting, our Advent, is not a time to twiddle our thumbs. We are called to be active. We are called to pray and rejoice that God has not abandoned us to evil. To model what is good and peaceful. To allow God's Spirit to shine in our midst for the God of peace is really at work among us.

But there are other marks of this waiting as well. Paul could not state it more clearly, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." This is not a command that must somehow be fulfilled. Rather, Paul is naming the work of the Spirit in the midst of the community, in the midst of life. It is the Spirit's work that awakens and sustains our rejoicing and prayer and thanksgiving. In other letters, Paul makes it clear that these things are fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22; Romans 8:15-16).

If we allow all of our Scripture readings for this Third Sunday of Advent to dialogue among themselves, we have ample indication of the source of this rejoicing, praying and thanksgiving. Psalm 126 speaks directly to it. The Psalm reads, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy..." When the Lord restored, when the Lord did this, when God acts, only when God acts, are we caught up in that action of rejoicing, praying and thanksgiving. And of course prayer is never just the inclinations of the human heart but the Spirit working God's Word through and in our existence, revealing our need and raising our cry, both of lament and praise.

It is this work, this art of the Holy Spirit sanctifies each believer and the community entirely (verse 23). The believer or the company of believers can never keep themselves sound and blameless. Any such "keeping" is rooted in the Holy Spirit's action. What does this mean? The imperatives rejoice, pray, give thanks are imperatives. Paul is naming the action of the Holy

Spirit as it manifests itself in the life of the community and he calls on the community to acknowledge, name, live into these gifts of compassion and love.

These gifts are not simply moral obligations or disciplines intended to prepare us. No, they are already manifestations of God's presence in the Spirit that consumes and transfigures spirit, soul and body. Yet, how often do we relegate prayer to "when we have time" and rejoicing to praise songs? How often do we eliminate thanksgiving all together as if it were merely our work rather than the Spirit's?

We may be waiting for the imminent coming of Christ but, at the same time, the waiting happens simultaneously while we dwell in the presence of God's Spirit who is already working and shaping our community into a gospel witness. The Spirit works in and out of the community with signs and opportunities that can be hard to express sometimes: a deep gospel joy, an incessant prayer in words and in silence, a thanksgiving that culminates in Christ's own body and blood shared in the community.

Perhaps this explains why singing joyful songs in Advent can somehow try to express the inexpressible: we cannot put into words the incredible mystery of God-made-flesh, and yet we have known it in our bones. We have felt God with us even when we could never explain how that could be. Looking towards Christ's birth is our communal recognition, our shared celebration, that not only that God will be with us, but that God is with us still, God is still speaking, God is still acting in our lives and in the life of the world that God loves so well. God is still with us, and we celebrate, and we sing our songs this morning and the next.

We believe that God is at work in every human endeavor that strives for peace and wholeness, even if that peace is partial and that wholeness only glimpsed at this moment in time. We are leaning toward that day when all things will be whole, not just restored but made shining, radiantly new, like the beautiful dawn of creation itself.

And this promise isn't for just one nation but for *all* of God's children; theologian Dennis Olson reminds us that God made promises to Abraham and Sarah about being a blessing to "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:1-3) (*The Lectionary Commentary: The Old Testament and Acts*). So, the healing and compassion will encompass all those who suffer, and the rebuilding will make our social systems as strong as our bridges will be made sturdy: *a just world for all*.

It is in Christ who continually calls the community into this exercise of faith, an exercise that is not just individually accomplished but communally realized. As Paul proclaims in his benediction immediately after this passage, says, "greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss" (1 Thess. 5: 6). Greet one another, male and female, with an embrace that breaks social and cultural norms. We are a community rooted in the Spirit waiting, serving one another with a joyful, loving heart.