

Sermon – Advent 1

Psalm 25, 1Thess3: 9-13, Luke 21:25-36

Lead me in the ways of your truth and teach me: for you are the God of my salvation, Amen.

Today we start the beginning of a new liturgical year. This cycle is known as the Year of Luke because we'll draw many of our Gospel readings from the Gospel of Luke. It's also the beginning of Advent and this morning we lit our first Advent candle marking the start of our journey to Christmas and the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the incarnation and revelation of God – God with skin on! In today's modern world, the focus in this time, tends to be on Jesus' birth, but Advent also has a deeper meaning, a meaning that is mysteriously tied up with the concept of time, and that is, the preparation for Jesus' second coming. And while readings in coming weeks will take up more common narratives, today's reading taps into that deeper meaning of Advent which goes to the core of our existence and the most profound hope that we Christians have: that in Jesus we have a Saviour, someone who restores us, both in this world here and now, and eternally. So today, I want to follow our various readings and unpack how we can be restored by hope, and how we can look forward into this coming year, after 2 years of the ups and downs of the pandemic, with a focus of restoration both of ourselves and our community.

Our first reading from Jeremiah has the Lord declaring that the days are surely coming when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel. The book of the prophet Jeremiah was written to a despairing Israel in exile. An Israel that had been conquered by the Babylonians, whose people had been carried away and whose temple in Jerusalem had been razed to the ground. More than any other prophet of the times, Jeremiah's writings provided hope for a wounded people. Its elegant prose focuses on salvation and redemption. With our post Easter, Christian eyes, we can read into this snippet, the coming of Jesus with

the words “I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” but for the Jewish people, this prophecy meant the restoration of the monarchy of the house of David.

Our first Advent candle, lit this morning, is the Prophet’s candle or candle of hope. And it is this idea of restoration through the hope of God’s promises that I want to dwell on this morning. How many of us have felt somewhat beaten up over the last two years? Perhaps we have felt that we too have been in exile. In exile from our families and friends as borders have closed and indeed, at times, we haven’t even been able to visit the friends who live locally. What has sustained you through these weeks? What has given you the energy and spirit to continue on? Has it been hope? Hope that the numbers would come down and vaccination rates would go up. Hope that the borders would open and we’d be able to get on a plane! Hope that you could feel the hugs and cuddles from grandchildren, or laughs with dearly missed friends. Or perhaps it’s been a hope born of knowing that all things come to pass and in God’s time, life will return in fullness, in this world, or the next.

And that brings us to our Psalm today which opens with:

In you, O Lord my God, have I put my hope: in you have I trusted, let me not be ashamed, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

And the psalmist goes on to say:

Lead me in the ways of your truth, and teach me: for you are the God of my salvation.

In you O Lord have I put my hope: in you have I trusted. Lead me in the ways of your truth for you are the God of my salvation. Hope, trust, truth, salvation.

What a beautiful group of words! They express all of our human longing and reflect our human frailty. Our longing for truth and salvation and the frailty of our hope and trust. But the psalmist goes on to assure us that God is a God of love, mercy and faithfulness. Our God is a God of covenant, a God of promises, a

God who is in relationship with us, if we want it, if we trust. And this is our hope. This is what restores us when we are worn out, defeated by the daily grind, or by the slings and arrows of the world around us. That God, who loves us as we are, who is a God of mercy and forgiveness, when inevitably we transgress, and are not kind to each other, the God who guides and teaches us in the paths that are just and true, this is the God that restores us to fullness of life. We can find restoration in our relationship with God.

By the way, fun fact about Psalm 25. It's an acrostic psalm in Hebrew! We can't tell that in the English translation but the first letter of the first word of each verse is the next letter of the alphabet in Hebrew. I can't tell you that because I've read it in Hebrew, but because I've read multiple commentaries that all make note of it! Even the psalmist has a sense of humour!

So from an Old Testament perspective, our relationship with God restores us. What does the New Testament, with its focus on the teachings of Christ, have to say? In the epistle today, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, we find Paul praying for the community in Thessalonica. "Night and day we pray most earnestly for you" he says. And specifically he prays that "the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all", and that he "strengthen your hearts in holiness".

One of the points to pick up here is that prayer strengthens our hearts and our relationship with God. If we wonder how to strengthen our relationship with God and find that restoration, perhaps the answer is with prayer. And prayer comes in many forms. In the Epistle today, Paul was writing down his prayers for the Thessalonians. Today in intercessions, Warren will pray on our behalf, leading us through prayers. You might be a walker and enjoy communion with God out in nature, on one or more of the many beautiful walks that we have locally. You might prefer meditation, finding your own quiet time with God, in the still spaces of your heart and soul. Or perhaps you like praying with other people and we also have zoom and in person opportunities for that in our own weekly cycle of

services and prayers. Or perhaps you are a creative, and you find God in imagination and art. All of these are good and positive options to know God more fully, to be in relationship and be restored. I have to say that when I am disciplined and make my nightly meditation, my sleep is so much better. And next year, Bishop Philip has offered to lead us through a meditation program so I am hoping to develop something with him for Lent.

And so onto our Gospel reading. Today the reading is taken from Jesus' last week in Jerusalem and we find him reflecting on the state of the world and these words can be just as aptly be said of today's world. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world."

When I think of the last two years with the pandemic and the distress of nations as they have confronted it and tried to manage it. Even today we are hearing of a 4th wave in Europe and another strain coming out of South Africa. And I reflect on the politization, globally and locally, of Covid and its impact, along with the dreadful consequences that communities all over the world have born, with death, isolation and severe stress in medical and support systems. It brings to mind our interconnectedness with each other, and with our environment and with God. And all this bound up inextricably with time, as waves in the northern hemisphere make their way across time to the southern hemisphere.

Time is God's domain. Perhaps this comes as a surprize. We generally think of eternity as God's domain and the here and now as our domain. Yet, not one of us can really predict what tomorrow will bring. Time is God's possession. In time, God encounters us and we encounter God. And Luke's reading today is talking about time, about the "now but not yet" nature of Jesus coming again. Jesus says "Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

In our post Easter world, two millennia after Jesus' life on earth, we are still in that period of time between his comings. How are we to respond? With prayer says Jesus, praying for strength and restoration in these volatile times.

Time is a gift and it holds the most precious of gifts – the presence of God. God is always present. Never is there a time when we are without God. But we must be open to God. In time, in prayer, we can open ourselves, our souls to God.

The Season of Advent awakens us again to God. The God who came to live among us and banish the fear of darkness and death and to lead us to new light and life. We live such frenetic lives. Advent calls us to slow down that we may be aware of God's continuous comings to us and among us. We are forever rushing from one thing to another, when and where do we find the time to welcome the Lord into our daily life?

Let us make time this Advent to be with God. Let us not fall into the trap where our hearts are weighed down with the worries of this life and we miss the time to be with God. This Advent, let us make time to be with God, in prayer, meditation, in creation, let us build on our relationship with God and be restored. And let us take that hope of restoration into the new year and reflect that into our families and community, showing how God restores us and brings us to a place of peace, mercy and love.

The Lord be with you.