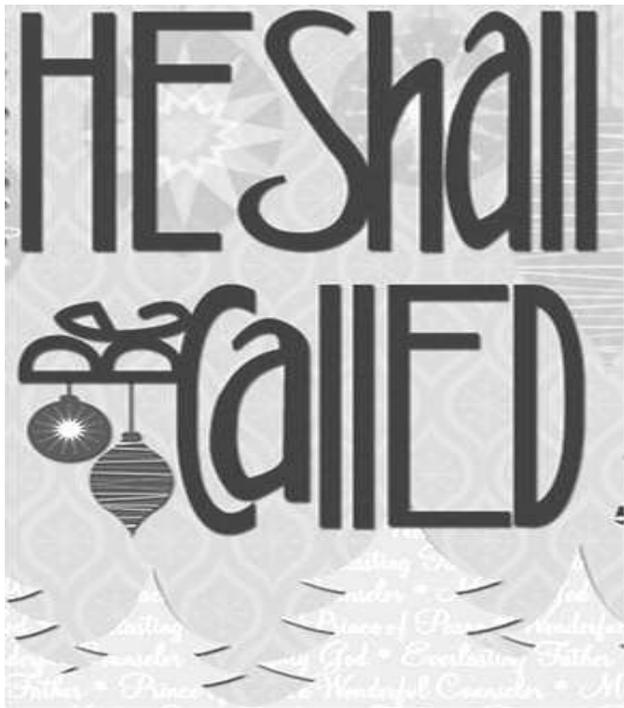


WELCOME TO...

The Presbyterian Church of
Saint David
December 02, 2012

Early Morning Service in the Season of Advent



Introduction to Theme: During the period that begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, communities that observe Advent have an opportunity to reflect on a significant dimension of faith: God as the Anticipated One. So much of religion seems to be concerned with the past. Tradition plays a large (and vital) role in most people's spirituality. Christmas itself is a celebration of a particular past event: the birth of Jesus. Advent is unique in that it celebrates the incomplete and the not-yet.

Advent draws us beyond a fascination with the past, and invites us to consider the possibility that the God of sacred tradition might also be a part of our immediate experience, as well as having something far greater to reveal in the future. Advent can name the reality that we do not have the final word. There is always more to God, and to life, than what we have seen so far.

Advent is not simply a preparation to celebrate Christmas. It is an invitation to welcome 'the One Who Comes'. It is rightly designated a prophetic season, for this is a time to identify with the prophets of all times as people who have ears to hear and eyes to see; people who are awake to the possibilities of God's dynamic presence in our own circumstances, someone like Jeremiah for Judah of old.

Over the four Sundays of Advent this year, as we begin a year that will focus especially on the Gospel of Luke, the themes will be as follows:

- Seeing beyond the horizon of humanity (Luke 21:25-36)
- John the Baptist: prepare the way of the Lord (Luke 3:1-6)
- Responding to prophetic voices (Luke 3:7-18)
- The child of promise (Luke 1:39-45)

Hymn: Emmanuel, Emmanuel

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Prayer of Confession: *To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. I put my trust in you, O God, do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let those be ashamed who neglect your faithfulness, and who act with evil intent. Teach me your ways, O God and guide me in your paths.*

We bring to mind these things for which we are ashamed - for wilfully acting with less than good intentions - for abusing the faithfulness of God by our failure to live faith-full lives. (A time of silence to reflect on these words) Forgive us, O God - cleanse our hearts and minds of all that prevents us from loving you and loving our neighbour. May our lives be marked by faith active in love as we watch and wait for your breaking into our world once more. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen (Sharing the Peace)

Jeremiah 33:14-16 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

The Communities Conversation

Luke 21:25-36 "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 the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 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."

Conversation: Where is this passage meant to take us? What does it have to say about God's plan for us?

Hymn: People in darkness

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Invitation: *God has prepared for us things beyond our imagining. This sacrament is part of what God has given us for such a time as this. In this sacrament we look back to the mighty acts of God and remember them. We remember that this promise is for us in the here and now. We anticipate the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time. All this is ours, so we gladly come!*

There's a wonderful scene in the story of *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, when the boy named Dickon and his friend Mary explore a most wonderful hidden garden. It appears that many branches of the trees and the rose bushes are dead – the word "gray" is repeated again and again. But Dickon takes out a knife and cuts into a branch, where he finds "a shoot which looked brownish green instead of hard, dry gray," and he assures Mary that, deep inside, the tree is as full of life and promise and hope as these two young people themselves.

A church that "does what it's supposed to do," like a good king, a church that lives and breathes God's justice and God's righteousness – not *self-righteousness*, but *God's* righteousness – is a shoot, green and new on the inside, holding life and hope and promise no matter what things may look like on the outside. In the midst of loneliness and despair, poverty and war, in the face of communal depression and personal heartache, these churches throw open their doors and their hearts to all of God's precious children and offer them a place, a community, where the quiet little flames of hope can be fanned into the fires of justice and peace, fanned into the warmth of spiritual homes for those who thought that there was no hope at all that they would ever find a place of such beauty and kindness, such tenderness and fierce hope, a welcome home in which to grow their faith by participating in the dream of God. These are churches that love worship and learning, churches that are open and generous, full of feeling, beautiful and just, churches that long for, and draw their strength from, the dream of God. They are like secret gardens for God's people.

In so many ways, the world around us may appear, well, broken, especially at the end of a long and bitterly divisive political season: relationships within families and communities, political parties and governmental processes, nations and economies and social systems have been damaged almost beyond repair. Even the earth

itself cries out in weather systems that bring destruction more sudden than the mightiest of conquering armies, and we witness the same part of New York City that once burned, now under water. We wonder, too, if we'll ever be able to clean up the mess we have made in our rivers and oceans, the air and the ground itself. If we look around us, justice and righteousness do not appear to be the order of the day. Too many people, especially children, awaken each day not in safety and security but in fear for their lives; too many awaken to another day of hunger and anxiety, another day of suffering and pain. While we may be annoyed at having to take our shoes off to get through airport security, low-wage workers struggle just to provide shelter for their children, and mothers in Africa watch their children starve while our leaders discuss whether to cut our foreign aid.

When we read these words from the prophet, and listen to the story of the suffering of the people he addresses, we look up and around us then to see the suffering of the world in this Advent season. Gary W. Charles writes evocatively that "[t]he stories of Advent are dug from the harsh soil of human struggle and the littered landscape of dashed dreams. They are told from the vista where sin still reigns supreme and hope has gone on vacation" (Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol. 1*). And Joanna M. Adams, writing in 2006, sounds as if she is talking about the world in this December six years later: "This Advent I feel an urgent need for the light that comes from God, and I do not think I am the only one....The clouds of anxiety about the future are hovering so low and close that you can barely see your hand in front of your face." She finds herself, like all of us in this Advent season, "holding on for dear life to the reassurance that God intends to make the world right again" ("Living by the Word" in *The Christian Century* November 28, 2006).

Advent. Perhaps the most beautiful of all the church seasons (or perhaps I say that because it's my favorite),

Advent certainly brings out the poet not only in the prophet but in the commentators as well. Leonard Beechy calls Advent "Twilight time," drawing on the beautiful Celtic tradition with its sense of "the time between the times," like the thin places where we feel even for a moment the presence of the holy. I was taught that we live our lives in the "already-but-not-yet" of God's reign, and Beechy connects that beautifully to this season: "The church exists to remind us that we live in the time between the times, between what is dying and what is being born, between the 'already' of Christ's reign and the 'not yet' of Advent." At the beginning of another church year, Beechy reminds us of the power of the story we hear again and again to draw us "more deeply" into our own lives. And then he expresses even more succinctly the promise of this short text: "After a long and terrible night, said Jeremiah, a brilliant morning would dawn and a generation of God's people would wake up in safety in a place renamed 'justice.'" ("Living by the Word" in *The Christian Century* November 17, 2009). What would it be like to live in a place called "Justice"?

The brief passage from Jeremiah 33 designated for the first reading captures the essence of the Advent theme. It looks to a future time of blessing when a Davidic ruler will executive justice and righteousness in the land. Several aspects of an ancient world view are encapsulated in this brief text:

- The idea of the **ruler as a divine delegate** who serves as an agent to implement divine justice. Such a "lord" is acclaimed as "savior" (Greek: *soter*) and celebrated as a divine "son" of the community's patron deity ("God our Father"). Notice, in Paul's formula from 1 Thessalonians, how these ideas are applied to God and Jesus by the earliest Christian communities known to us.
- The role of the **prophetic oracle promising dynastic succession** as a guarantee of divine blessing.

- The powerful tradition of **Davidic descent** for an authentic claim to Jewish leadership.

A text such as this can also invite us to think about the role of prophecy in ancient Israel and in post-biblical times:

- The **original prophet** seems to have been a recognized figure who could be invited to speak a word "from the LORD." Such characters could be on the ruler's staff, and receive their living from the state. But they could also be independent charismatic figures who sometimes acted in opposition to the ruler and the official cult.
- In time **prophetic texts** are produced: a scroll for Isaiah, a scroll for Jeremiah, a scroll for Ezekiel, and another collecting the words of "the Twelve" into a single work. These "Latter Prophets" excluded Daniel, but were matched by another set of "Former Prophets:" Joshua, Judges, Samuel & Kings. The origins of the Latter Prophets are a puzzle, but each of the four scrolls appears to be an anthology of texts designed to fashion a self-conscious prophetic voice apart from the historical deeds and words of the named prophet. What, if anything, was the relationship between the historical figure of Isaiah or Amos and the books that have become their legacy to humanity?
- Centuries later when Tiglath-Pileser and Nebuchadnezzar are but vague memories, the **prophetic texts are appropriated in new circumstances**. Often they were reduced to catalogues of predictions and employed in theological confrontations between opposing factions of the pious. At times they tapped deep wellsprings of the human spirit. The prophetic books of Scripture have been both springs of fresh water and poisoned wells fostering hatred between different human communities.

The difference may depend on the spirit in which we approach these texts. When approached with an Advent mind \set -- in anticipation that the God Who Comes is

also the God Beyond All Names and the God who has yet more (new) truths to reveal -- these ancient texts can draw us into the liberty of the children of God.

Hymn: Come my way, my truth, my life

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Prayer of Thanksgiving: *The Lord be with you. And also with you. Lift up your hearts. We lift them to the Lord. Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give our thanks and praise. Glorify the Lord with me. Let us together praise His name.* (we continue in prayer) *And now we celebrate the sacrament of our salvation, a gift of God born in Bethlehem, long anticipated by Israel of old, (Silence) Gracious God, we gather as a community expecting you to be active in our lives and in the life of the church. We come knowing that you welcome us with open and accepting arms. We come ready to meet with you, and be changed by the encounter. By your word and Spirit, O God, sanctify these your own gifts of bread and wine, that the bread which we break may be to us communion in the body of Christ, and the cup of blessing which we bless may be communion in the blood of Christ Come, holy Spirit, come. The bread we break and the cup we now take are a sharing in the life of Christ. The gifts of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.*

Communion

Prayer following communion: Gracious God, we give you thanks for satisfying our hungry hearts with this holy meal shared in the Spirit with Jesus, your Son, our Lord. Strengthened and refreshed, we go from here to reveal your love and your righteousness in the world . This we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Hymn: Sent forth by your blessing

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Go into this week upheld by the promises of God, blessed by the holiness of Jesus, made strong by the power of the Holy Spirit.

