

Preemptive Praise

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Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church

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Isaiah 12:2-6

“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

3rd Sunday of Advent

Movement 1 – The Bummed Out Advent Sermon

Advent can be a difficult time. For the Christian, for the one who truly tries to keep focus on Jesus, and is truly waiting for Jesus, Advent can be a difficult time. The world is celebrating, the world is laughing and sharing egg nog, and I’m sure you want to laugh with them. Maybe you want to hang up your stockings after the first Sunday of Advent, and maybe you are ready to open presents after the second week. But, as you may have realized by now, we do things a little differently. We, who call ourselves Christians, walk a different path. We are not yet celebrating. We are not yet offering praise, and that can make Advent difficult.

Think of the past two sermons you may have heard. Two weeks ago, the sermon text was an apocalyptic text of doom and gloom. If you happened to sneak into the Episcopalian church where I was preaching that day, you would have heard me call the congregation to look for signs of “cosmic upheaval.” I called on them to look for signs of things that are not quite right with the world, for oppression, suffering, and despair, and to begin the Advent season with those signs. Not really a happy, holiday kind of sermon.

Maybe you remember the sermon from last week. In that sermon I talked more about what is wrong with the world, and about waiting for a harsh cleaning. I reminded you that we must rely on God for that cleaning. Again, this is not really a happy, holiday kind of sermon.

These are bummers, these sermons. These are messages that call us to look to the despair of the world. These are exhortations that call us to embrace the darkness of our lives, to focus on what is not right. We are directed through the scriptures not to decorate ourselves, but to almost turn to a penitential rite of lamentations and petitions. We are called not to look to what is right about the season (a false idea alluded to often by the spokespersons of culture), but to look to what is wrong about the world. We are to listen to the difficulties that our neighbors are facing. We are to name and claim the hardships we face in our own lives. We are to read the paper, watch the news, and take note of the tragedy and the despair. We are to go to the hospital, the rehab unit, the substance abuse center, the homeless shelter, and weep because there is so much suffering, there are so many tears, and there are so many places where God’s presence is needed. This is not the normal holiday approach that we are called to embrace by the world, but when we consider the scriptures of the past two weeks, and when we consider the sentiment of Advent, we can realize and understand from whence such an approach comes.

I think of the prophet Isaiah, and the not-so-good news that he often had to carry to the people. Isaiah predicted doom, destruction and exile. Isaiah predicted the fall of Israel, but not because of the outside threats. Rather, Isaiah predicted the fall of Israel because of the internal corruption and decay. Just as we now look to the signs of cosmic upheaval, Isaiah saw signs of cosmic upheaval; signs that the order of creation was turned around and ignored. It must not have been easy for Isaiah to point to these signs, yet it was what God called him to do.

In the same way, we have been challenged to point to the despair and sorrow of the world. In *Charlie Brown’s Christmas*, Charlie Brown tries to return to the real meaning of Christmas, and runs into all kinds of problems. He seems to have a knack to find all that which is wrong, instead of that which is right. Case in point, the tree that Charlie Brown found and tried to decorate was pathetic. There is even a point when Linus says to Charlie Brown, “Charlie Brown, you’re the only person I know who can take a wonderful season like Christmas and turn it into a problem.”

Maybe we feel like Charlie Brown as we look around for that which is wrong with the world, and not for that which is right. At a time of parties and celebrations, we have been challenged to share truth and despair. From our hard and demanding sermons, to the difficult call of Christ and the prophets, Advent, for the dedicated Christian, can be a difficult time.

Movement 2 – Emphatic Waiting

Yet Advent is a time to realize that we are indeed missing something that we indeed need something and we are yearning for something. After all, Advent is about waiting, we are waiting for something.

Those Israelites who listened to Isaiah realized that they were headed in the wrong direction (often too late for many of them), and they looked for some kind of hope and some kind of promise. They realized that what they needed was a Messiah. They realized that what they needed was another anointed one, in the line of David, and in the character of David, to save them and to lead them back to God's glory. They realized that in their dabbling with other gods, in their selfishness, in their disregard of the Lord their God something was missing. Those who could see the growing hole of darkness were waiting with a holy longing for God to save them and return them to glory.

Unless we name and claim the hardships and the despair of the world, it is difficult to realize that we are indeed waiting and what it is we are waiting for. If we merely follow the story of the world, then we are just waiting for nicely wrapped presents, good home cooking, and some time with the family. But if we stay to the scriptures, and listen to the story of God's relationship with humanity, if we live the story of a people awaiting a Messiah, then we realize that we are waiting for something greater than presents and cookies. We see the sickness of society, we see the emptiness in our own life, and we are waiting for the Messiah who is to redeem us all. Liberation theologians are theologians who begin their understanding of God with the experience of the people. These theologians would look to the people and see the suffering of the poor, oppressed, and outcast. They named such suffering as the place where one begins to understand God. They claimed that such suffering cannot be redeemed just through programs or changes in social systems, but are primarily redeemed through the glory of the cross. They know what we are waiting for.

Think if you fell and broke your arm. You would be sitting in the Emergency room, very much aware of the pain in your arm. You would be very aware how much you need your arm, and you would now be in a state of waiting for the doctor, to help your arm heal so that you can live a full life again. You would know what you are waiting for.

There is so much in the world that is broken and we are waiting for the glory of the Lord, through the infant Christ, through the savior Christ, to make the world whole again. There is a hole in humanity, a wound in society, and it can only be healed through Christ. There is a yearning in our lives. An emptiness that gnaws at our very being and it can only be healed through Christ. When we sit in despair, then we can know what we are waiting for.

This is why Advent is so difficult for Christians, because we need to do more than sympathize with the suffering. Charitable giving is up in this time of year, but we are run the risk of giving out of obligation. "Yes, yes, we know that there is suffering. We know that not everyone will get presents, and we feel badly about it," society says. But that is not enough for the Christian. We need to do more than pay lip service to our own limps and struggles. We need to acknowledge that as our neighbor suffers we suffer, and together we both need Christ. If we only acknowledge the surface, then how can we truly be waiting for Christ? If we only acknowledge the suffering in a callous and detached way, then how can we truly claim to need Christ?

Yet, when we can name our own weakness, and when we can name and have empathy with the weaknesses of the world, then we are in a place where we can truly cry out for the Messiah to come. Then we are in a place where we can truly say that we need Jesus, and we need him now. Then we are ready for the birth of the Holy Son. This is why Advent is so difficult, because we suffer with the suffering. This is not an easy

way to prepare for the birth, it is not an easy way to prepare for the coming of the Lord, for we are to sit, and pray, and experience the difficulties, the darkness and the despair of the world around us. Only then will we know what we are waiting for.

Movement 3 – Turning to a Prophetic Hope

Yet Advent is not without hope. Advent is not meant to be only a time of remorse, of laments, or of sorrow. Advent is a time to look forward with a sense of joy, a sense of hope, and knowledge of a promise given to us by God. This passage from Isaiah is looking forward, it speaks to a future hope and it offers a promise. This passage closes a section of difficult words from Isaiah with words of promise and hope. It does not leave the people in the darkness, but point them towards a light. Advent is not without hope.

I remember when I was younger we used to get Lego sets to build castles, boats and space ships. They were very complex and very involved and took a lot of time and concentration. I remember building one castle that had a good number of steps and more pieces than I can count on one hand. Halfway through the process, I began to get discouraged and felt like I wanted to give up. I had nothing that looked like a castle. I had a lot of parts still to add to this structure, and I felt like I was getting nowhere. Yet when I looked ahead at the final picture, I saw where I was headed, what I was building, and my hope returned. I knew that one day I would build that castle, because the book promised that I would get there (if I followed all of the steps). This is a promised hope.

The passage from Isaiah looks forward like a telescope into the place where God will lead the Israelites. The passage offers that hope and that promise of the time yet to be; of that time yet to come. The theologian, Jurgen Moltmann talks about hope as a belief in the future as a real promise that affects the here and now of one's life. As we wait in Advent, as we understand the weight of the waiting, as we sit with the suffering, in the depth of the darkness, we are given a hope and a promise of where things will head. We are given a promise that things will change. Isaiah gives us hope. Advent is not without hope. We have hope.

Movement 4 – Me and Jesus and Hope

We have hope for your life and for mine. We have a personal and individual hope that God will be our salvation. We have a hope that through the presence of God, through the actions of Christ, we will be known, loved and redeemed. I once visited women in her nineties whose health was failing. You could say that she was in her own darkness, and that she was, in a sense, waiting for her pain to pass, and waiting for Christ to come. As often happens, we began to talk about death, and what she might expect. This saint of a woman looked at me and said, "I am not afraid, I know my Lord, and I know I am saved." This kind of assurance, this kind of courage is the same kind of assurance that the prophet Isaiah is pointing to in this passage.

The first section of this passage is a personal section, written in the first person for the individual to sing. It is a song that we are to say about our own life. It is a promise that we will be able to rest on the Lord and only the Lord for our salvation. John Wesley (the starter of the Methodist movement) said of this passage, "My salvation hath not been brought to pass by man, but by the almighty power of God." It is God in whom we rest, and it is through God that our salvation is assured.

Those of you who wonder if Christ could come for you, the answer is yes. Those of you who wonder if salvation can be given to you, the answer is yes. Those of you who wonder if you can be healed of your past faults, your current failings, and for even the sins which you have yet to commit, the answer is yes. When you were washed with those Baptismal waters, when the Holy Spirit fell upon you, you were cleaned by God. This is the hope that we are given, it is the hope in which we are assured that we will draw water from the wells of salvation that we will drink of God's grace and that God's glory will be known in our very lives.

So we can follow Christ into the wilderness of the world knowing that we are saved and that we will be saved. We can follow Christ into the waters of the river Jordan, knowing that we are redeemed and that we will

be redeemed. We can follow Christ to the ends of the earth, and rest in the promise that God will be our strength, and our might, and our salvation. This is a hope for your life and mine. It is a hope for us all to live.

Movement 5 – Us and Jesus and Hope

We have hope for this community. We have hope for a church that sometimes stumbles and sometimes soars. The passage in Isaiah moves from the personal to the corporate, it moves from the singular to the plural. The passage speaks to all the people of Israel calling them to look to a day when they will be able to give thanks to the Lord, and a time when they will sing praises to the Lord for what God has done. The passage calls on the people to look to a time when they will declare to the nations what the Lord has done. The commentator, Christopher Seitz, claims that this section of the passage is the community's response to the restoration that God has granted. It is a response to the salvation of the people. The passage moves from the personal to the corporate and gives hope for the community.

Today we are to claim that hope as well. When we look at the brokenness of our society, when we look at the brokenness of our own church, we are to hold onto the hope that things will change. Again, things will only change through the working and the grace, and the peace of the Lord. That is the promise we rest on. There will be a time when we will share the glory of what the Lord has done to all those around us. There will be a time when we, as a church, we turn to our neighbors and call them to see how we have been graced and blessed. There will be a time when we will declare to the nations the good things that the Lord has done. We will brag about our church, our community and our Lord because of the good things God has done. We will overflow with the tales of blessings. We will sing songs of praise so that all can hear of the glory of the Lord.

It will be like the baptisms of old. The ones when people would all walk down to the river singing, and praising God. *Shall we gather at the river?*

**Shall we gather at the river,
Where bright angels he has brought,
With it's crystal tides forever
Flowing by the throne of God**

**Yes, we'll gather at the river.
The beautiful, the beautiful, river.
Gather with the saints at the river,
That flows by the throne of God**

**Ere we reach the shining river
Lay we every burden down,
Praise our spirits will deliver
And provide our robe and crown.**

**Yes, we'll gather at the river.
The beautiful, the beautiful, river.
Gather with the saints at the river,
That flows by the throne of God**

**Soon we'll reach the shining river,
Soon our pilgimage will cease,**

**Soon our happy hearts will quiver
With the melody of peace.**

**Yes, we'll gather at the river.
The beautiful, the beautiful, river.
Gather with the saints at the river,
That flows by the throne of God**

We would sing and we will sing, calling on all those around to join in this walk, this march, so that they may see the glory of the Lord. Then we would ask the individual to publicly declare their faith so the world may know the how God has saved them and the throngs surrounding them would hear of the glory of God. That was a powerful form of Baptist witness. That is where we will be again. We will march again to the river so that all may see, and all may know that God has indeed blessed us, saved us, and led us to glory. Troubles are washed away, sorrow is washed away, sin is washed away, and we will walk with the glory of the Lord.

We will get to that time. We will embrace that moment. We will be blessed as a people. We are given hope, and we will have hope as a people of God.

Movement 6 – Preemptive Praise and Active Hope

We have hope in the miracle of the baby. We have hope in the birth of Christ. Yes, in Advent, we sit with the despair of the world, and we wait. Yes, in Advent we look at, and we acknowledge the hardships of the world and we wait. Yet in Advent, we also praise God for the hope that is promised and the hope that is to come. In Advent we can offer a preemptive praise for that which God has yet to do. This hope is real, and it infuses our waiting. We wait for the grace of God, but with a smile. We wait for the salvation of the Lord, but with a light heart, because we know it is coming. We know what we are waiting for.

Think of a child that sees his or her presents before Christmas. Now the waiting has changed. It is not longer, when or what, but a waiting for something. No longer are we waiting with a question of what, but instead we wait with courage of knowing what. We have that hope and promise, and that is why we can praise. We know what we are waiting for.

When we praise God, for what God has yet to do, then our hope becomes active. That woman who was struggling with her health, was already praising God for a salvation she had been assured. I praise God for this community, not only because of who we are, but because of who we are going to become through the actions of the Lord. We know what we are waiting for.

Even before the baby is born, we can praise God for the peace, for the glory, for the redemption and for the salvation that will be incarnated before us. We know what we are waiting for.

Even before the angels appear to the shepherds we can praise God for the heavenly host, for the witness of the lowly, for the hope given to us by outcasts. We know what we are waiting for.

Even before Joseph and Mary are sent from lodging to lodging. Even before they find themselves cast out to the stable we can praise God for being with the outcasts, for coming to us from such humble places because we know what we are waiting for.

We have that hope as well. The hope is real, it is to come. The baby will be born, the Son will walk amongst us, and we will live into God's hope of tomorrow. We praise God for what God has done, for what God is doing, and for what God is about to do. We know what we are waiting for.

AMEN