

Sermon for 6 December 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Second Sunday in Advent

Scriptures: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

“A softer voice”

The voice of the Bible begins softer today.

Because our scriptures have been studied so long and carefully over the past couple of centuries, we have clearer ideas about who wrote them and when, in their many different sections. Today’s reading is thought to have been produced by a spiritual leader, a prophet, in a time later than what we read last Sunday ... a time when the most powerful leader in the Middle East was King Cyrus, who actually told the Jews they could return home if they wanted to. “Comfort, comfort ye my people,” this new Isaiah wrote in response...”

So we are led in our worship today to meditate on those times when, even in darkness and trouble, beauty and peace come alive to us. This is important, for we never spend time alone, or worshipping with others, that is all the same from one occasion to another.

Those of us who’ve lived a long time know this well. Years can go by that we call dark, and sad; but those can teach humility and patience and, eventually, wisdom and insight that are as important as anything that comes to us from happiness and contentment and success and security. Respect and sympathy for one another ... and for ourselves as well ... can grow out of these times, and so can courage and determination to go forward, venture outside our comfort zone. Reassuring one another these days that good things can emerge from all the bad things happening now, is essential work for each of us.

Psalm 85 builds on this side of Advent’s quiet and gloom. “Lord, you were favorable to your land...you forgave the iniquity of your people...The Lord will give what is good...” The Bible, the order of worship, and belonging together on a long-term basis, as well as our daily prayer and meditation privately, have this possibility, always.

The second letter of Peter expands on this by saying “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years,” and also by pointing out that God is patient, giving more time so that all have an opportunity to “come to repentance,” to look over our behavior and our lives in general and make fresh attempts to do what is right, and just, and tender.

However, this is the Sunday when John the Baptist is introduced this Advent. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God” is how Mark starts the Gospel we focus on this year. Now that we are quiet, and encouraged by the hope and gentleness of the dark and stillness, we are no less seriously addressed. I translate Mark’s opening verses this way: “Be clear on how close we have come in this nation to chaos and confusion in this recent election. Be clear in your dealings with CoVid and all its effects that we are a fragile people on a fragile planet, far from wise handling of ourselves or the rest of nature.”

To see in this present gloom and uncertainty an incredible hopefulness is our calling, clear and strong. We are such skittish creatures! "You are the salt of the earth!" We divide so quickly into tribes. "I pray that they may be one."

John the Baptist is the one who recognized Jesus when Jesus came with the crowds to be baptized by John. I see the Bible telling us here that the most important truths can come to us in the most unexpected moments ... and at the same time, there are feelings, insights, that alert us, as John alerted those around him and, perhaps, Jesus himself.

John was ascetic, living frugally, preaching harshly, insisting in a troubled time that paying attention and getting ready were essential. Out of the darkness and even in great uncertainty, messengers come to us, over the years. "Wait! Watch!" Advent insists, every year, and its influence continues in the life of faith, in season and out of season.

Perhaps Jesus became a disciple of John. Maybe he lived among John's followers for years. At some point, however, he left and began his own unique career. "Ye shall increase, but I shall decrease," is among our texts that speak of this, in John's voice.

And that, however softly we hear the voice, is the point of this day, and this brief season. The beginning is not John, or the world around us, or even our own frame of mind or bodily condition. The beginning is the Messiah, the Christ, and our mission to accept and spread the Gospel of his life, and death, and resurrection. John is the confronter, the advance notice, which often comes in the dark and the waiting. "The darkness is not dark to thee," the Bible tells us elsewhere. There is no time ... not the midnight, or the first light, or anything we predict or control. God is with us. Messiah is among us. As the poet says, "That is all we know, and all we need to know."

Amen.