

Sermon for 18 December 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Scriptures: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalter (*Insert: alternate leader and people*) Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19;

Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

“Always”

Let's do a quick review of our four-week Bible study known as Advent. On the first Sunday, we spoke of life in the Christian way as constantly *starting over*. We quoted Jesus at the end of his life telling his disciples to “keep awake,” because the meaning of things, the conclusion of whatever seems most important now, the next stage ... however you want to put it ... is going to surprise everybody, good and bad, smart and simple. We're forever “starting over.” The yogi masters had an expression, “And now, yoga,” which meant, after you've learned all these practices and understood all these tendencies, at your next session you start out as a little child, ready to learn from scratch. Use everything you've learned, but be ready to learn fresh, more deeply, with what you've already found.

Then the second Sunday, with John the Baptist, all his harshness and criticism of current behavior, I chose the word “righteousness” as a big concept in both Judaism and Christianity. We know right from wrong, and want to be right, because only the truth really matters, everything else just hurts and has to be redone... and yet that's an endless learning process, so be patient with each other and with ourselves. John the Baptist was right. He got our attention; but he himself insisted what we see, how we build, is less than what is still going to come.

Then last Sunday I preached without a manuscript, read the newspaper, talked about how worried the head of NATO was that things could erupt into much more widespread conflict, and how crucial I felt it was to focus on negotiations. I tried to say being Christian is not just starting over, and not just trying to be right and good. It's also being extremely focused on right now, and we used Mary's song as our theme. In the midst of everything there's this beautiful, hopeful, incredible trust that comes to us as Jesus people, so that in any part of history we look back on, and any part of our own personal journey we experience, there's this “Yes, but still...” sigh of relief and touch of fresh life coming... Every moment, in the Christian path, has significance. Now is always where we are, with God. Everything we need is with us to live this moment fully. Don't mistake me: Other traditions provide this insight as well, and many outside established belief systems experience this deep encouragement from within, as well as from other sources, both human and otherwise. Spiritual support is fundamental in existence.

So today, as we round the corner of our summing up, the thing that stands out most to me is Joseph, and his ... I call it his *wisdom*. It seems to me one of the most representative qualities of our faith. He didn't stand out. He didn't even agree, as far as we tell it. It may always have bothered him that his first child was not his, was illegitimate, was not properly conceived and launched. Yet he had the insight; he was given the intuition; heaven advised him --- put it any way you want. Just don't wrap it up in gold hush Be present with what we understand of life and conception and sex and humility and character and What Joseph tells me, I'm

trying to say this time around ... is that ALWAYS we are offered the chance to be loving and cooperative with the basic goodness of things ... and that's walking with the Lord, that's choosing righteousness ... that's insisting on the importance of what we know NOW ... that's being AWAKE in the sense of thinking Christ is in all, all the time, and never forsakes us in our precise spot of the larger picture.

That's all. That's my summing up of the meaning of everything that Advent has brought me to with you this time.

Always.

We sing a song in the New Wave Singers that's based on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. "Love Is..." I think it's from the show, "Hamilton." Love is love. Cannot be killed, or swept aside. Believeth all things ... hopeth all things...

That's what Joseph reveals to me, this year, in the Gospel of Matthew, on this fourth Sunday of Advent.

Always you can lean into, learn into, trust into, hope into, the love that runs the show... all things ...

Always.

Amen.