

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 11, 2016
Advent 3
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Two weeks ago we entered this season of Advent with the warning that Jesus' return will occur in the least expected moments, in the everyday rhythms of life when folks are busy earning a living, raising kids, and enjoying their grandkids. Like in Noah's day, when folks weren't looking for or expecting the flood, Jesus' return will catch many unaware, like the thief who comes in the silent stillness of the night.

Because this is so, God's people are to be ready at all times to greet him when he comes. We are to guard against *complacency*, to encourage one another and to help each other to be ready. The passing of time should heighten our awareness, not dull our senses. With each new Advent God's people should be helping each other to strain their gaze just a little higher, knowing that the day of their redemption is nearer now than when we first believed.

Last week we heard from John the Baptist, who called on people to prepare for the Messiah's coming by making the road straight, by preparing the King's Highway for his coming. The preparation John called for, of course, was primarily the *interior preparation of the heart*, a turning away from sin and the old life and a

turning toward God and the new life God offers. The old fashioned word for this preparation is *repentance*.

Repentance is necessary because not only can folks be lulled into a sense of complacency, but they can also be infected with *presumption*. Because God is a God of compassion, because God's mercy has been lavishly poured out upon us, because God eagerly desires to forgive, folks can be tempted to think that they are *entitled* to those blessings. They presume that God's offer of mercy and forgiveness will always be available, even though they show no desire in the present to change the course of their lives. They presume that there will always be time later for them to repent and to do the necessary interior work in their hearts and lives. For those infected with presumption, the motto is: "There's always tomorrow."

Of all things God's people can ill afford (especially during Advent), *complacency* and *presumption* rank high on the list. But the list is not complete. Today, with the help of our Scripture lessons, we add another item to the list. We will look to all of the lessons, but pay particular attention to the words of Isaiah.

These beautiful images in Isaiah 35 -- images of the desert turning green with growth and of radical transformation -- were written to people whose experience of life had become as dry and barren as the land Isaiah writes about.

The people who heard these words had been taken captive. They had been

forcibly removed from their homes, their lives, and their livelihoods. They had spent decades in a foreign land, held captive by a foreign people. They prayed daily for God to help them, to come to them and deliver them. They prayed, and through their tears you could hear these words: "O God, we just want to go home."

Days turned to weeks. Weeks turned to months. And months turned to years. *And still no change. No word from God.* No one to come and set them free and lead them home.

Now, I'm no expert. But I'm fairly certain that when folks find themselves in this kind of situation, *complacency* is not their major obstacle. When life has become all black and white and no color, when hope begins to dissipate as fast as our Advent candles burn from top to bottom, *presumption* is not the primary danger.

Of all the things God's people can ill afford (especially during Advent), *complacency* and *presumption* are certainly very important. But they are not the full story. To these we must add something else, perhaps even more important than these others.

Of all things God's people can ill afford (especially during Advent), it is *despair* that rises to the top of the list. And like complacency and presumption, we must help each other and encourage each other to guard against it, because we often find ourselves in circumstances where we become spiritually discouraged.

Hands and knees are not the only things that can become weak and tired. *Hearts* and *spirits* can also reach a breaking point.

For instance, I would imagine today that many in our country who have been without work for a long time might be discouraged. In fact, I could easily understand where discouragement has given way to *despair*.

I would imagine today that some who are bowed low with the pain of grief are wondering how they are ever going to go on. There are parents today who are sitting next to a hospital bed where a young child lies, and that child will likely not be here for Christmas. There are families who will stand over grave sites this week, wondering how an apparently healthy person could suddenly be taken from them. I would understand if folks like these felt that despair was a viable option for them.

I would imagine today that there are many in our society and in our city who are aging, and who are finding that growing old brings with it many fears and uncertainties, and more questions than answers. I would understand if at times such folks are tempted to lose heart, to lose hope, to give in to despair.

I would imagine today that there are many folks, perhaps some in this congregation, who are spiritually tired. You look at your lives, your circumstances, your struggles, and you are tempted to give up. To give in. To

resign yourselves to the fact that things are never going to be different, that the way things now are is the way things will *always* be.

Do you know why Sheila lit the rose colored candle this morning along with the purple ones? The rose colored candle is customarily lit on the third Sunday of Advent because in many churches the day is known as "Gaudete" Sunday, which comes from the Latin word that means "rejoice." In many churches on this day choirs begin the service by singing "Rejoice in the Lord," and as you have seen, our Scripture lessons focus our attention on this theme of joy.

Lighting the rose candle today, then, is not merely some decorative, liturgical act. **It is the Church standing up against despair.** It is all of us, standing together, arm in arm, firm in the belief that we are going to exchange exile for homecoming, just like the folks to whom Isaiah wrote. Do you remember what Isaiah said to those people who longed to return home? He said:

Those who have been ransomed by the LORD will return to Jerusalem, singing songs of everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be overcome with joy and gladness.

And the day came when those folks did return, just like Isaiah said they would.

Of all the things God's people can ill afford (especially during Advent), *despair* tops the list. And so we gather here today, and we light this rose candle. And we open our hearts again to the Word of God. We stand together, with a fresh resolve to trust our hopes, not our fears. To trust our God, and not our

circumstances. To believe that the desert of our lives is the very place where God chooses to reveal His awesome power.

As you come to the table this morning, I invite you to bring with you the deepest ache of your heart. That need, circumstance, or relationship where you have been tempted to lose heart, to give up hope, perhaps even to despair. Bring that need with you this morning. As you receive the bread and wine, receive them as a promise that the way things *now are* is not the way they shall *always* be. Receive with them the assurance that transformation *is* possible. Then rise up, join hands with your brothers and sisters, and watch and wait His coming.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.