

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent    December 10, 2017    Ready or not here he comes!!

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

Happy New Year!

All of you look a little confused ... as well you should be. The secular new year isn't here yet. It won't arrive for three more weeks. But the Liturgical New Year has already arrived. Two Sunday's ago, on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, we celebrated Christ the King Sunday. That Sunday marked the end of Year A in the Liturgical calendar. The following Sunday, last Sunday, was the First Sunday in Advent and was the beginning of Liturgical Year B. So, we are in a New Year on the Christian calendar. The Liturgical Calendar runs in a three year cycle. We have now shared the entire cycle with each other since I arrived at St. Paul's. So, Happy new Year!

This morning, this Second Sunday of Advent, we lit the second Advent candle which is the candle of Peace. It's hard to imagine in the world we now occupy that Peace is the predominant theme. Horrible things are happening to people every day all over the world and even in our own country. But for us as Christians, the Advent Season is the season of Peace. We are making preparation for what we know is about to happen ... the inbreaking of God into the world in the person of Jesus Christ who arrives as an infant.

If you stop to think about it, PEACE can actually be an acronym for the whole of the Advent season. It begins with 'P' for preparation. During this season we are preparing for the arrival of the Christ child. There are any number of things we can do to prepare. The first, of course, is a simple heightened awareness of the coming of Jesus into the world. We need to get ourselves ready to receive Him just as we would get ready for any special event in our lives. But the preparation for his arrival has little, if anything, to do with what we normally and routinely do to prepare for Christmas. Most of us have this long To Do List that leads up to this celebration: cleaning the house, putting up a Christmas tree with all the decorations, making plans to be with friends and family, buying gifts, making special food, sending cards to those we want to remember at this time of year, school functions for our children and Church functions with our church family, travelling or getting ready to have houseguests. It's easy for all of these preparations to get in the way of the spiritual preparation that we are asked to make to make way for Jesus to enter our hearts and our lives anew.

The 'E' in PEACE can highlight the expectation we have for what will happen when Jesus arrives. What do we imagine will happen? My personal experience with expectations is that the reality of what actually comes to pass has little to do with what I expected. When you think about Jesus entering your heart and your life anew, what are your expectations? What do you think will be different for you? More importantly, what will you allow to be different for you?

The 'A' in PEACE is for anticipation. Most of us generate a strong sense of anticipation when we know something special is about to happen. Our sense of anticipation can be different depending on what we are thinking will happen. Our bored anticipation of an event ... like standing in line to get our first driver's license ... doesn't do much for our energy level and tries our patience. Time seems to move so slowly as if suspended or put on 'pause.' But our active participation for something we are looking forward to can heighten our energy and keep us more alert and energized waiting for the big event. We can have a sense of anticipating the joy we are expecting before it even arrives. Remember getting your first car? Or having your first date? Or your first day at school? Or your first day on a new job? Lots of expectations and very active anticipation!!

The 'C' in PEACE is for close self-examination. That's not an easy thing to do, but we are advised by John the Baptist to do just that. To make way for the coming of the Lord, he says, we need to repent. We need to change direction. We need to look at ourselves in a new light and see what others see and decide what we want to do differently. This takes more courage than most of us are willing to muster. There is nothing more frightening than blinding flashes of insight about ourselves. We all have these wonderful built-in defense mechanisms that shield us from having to see the worst parts of ourselves, but that doesn't mean they aren't there. Praying for that courage to look at ourselves honestly makes it possible for us to prepare to let Jesus in when he arrives. And it's very hard and earnest spiritual work. Where does the darkness lurk within us and take hold? Where will the light shine in us when Jesus gets here?

And the 'E' at the end of PEACE is for eternal hopefulness. As Christians we develop a sense of trust in God and in Christ Jesus that allows us to be hopeful even in the darkest moments or the times of deepest hurt or despair in our lives. We know in the center of our being that God loves each of us and is aware of the circumstances of our lives and the nature of our most secret and internal thoughts. We can't hide from God even though we can sometimes hide from ourselves. Our capacity to trust is a bit like muscle building ... the more we do it, the greater our capacity to do it becomes...and the more able we are to settle into that Peace from God that sinks all the way into our bones regardless of whatever is swirling around us. Our willingness and ability to trust makes it possible for us to hang onto hope in the most of dire of circumstances.

## *PAUSE*

Our Gospel lesson this morning is from the Gospel according to Mark which was the first gospel book to be written. It starts by saying “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Actually, the author of Mark is the one who gave us the term for the genre of writing that we know as the gospels. And it immediately makes reference to the Prophet Isaiah that we have just heard in our first lesson this morning.

John the Baptist appears in our Gospel lesson this morning telling all of us to get ready ... to prepare. As famous as John has become in his own world, he tells us that he is only the messenger. Someone greater than he will be appearing soon and we all need to get ready for him. John is the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He was, literally, out in the wilderness baptizing people in the River Jordan and telling them to repent of their sins. The River Jordan was physically located as the border between the wilderness and the Promised Land. It's symbolic to be baptized in the River Jordan ... to wash away sins before entering the Promised Land...the Promised Land of milk and honey ... the Promised Land of God's never failing love and care for us.

John's ministry in the Wilderness speaks to God's willingness to meet us where we are ... in our own wilderness. John is not in the center of Jerusalem. He is not in the Temple preaching to people. He is on the fringes of the society. He's far away from civilization and yet people hear about him and travel to him from all parts of Judea. Without internet or cell phones or cable TV, the word gets out that something important is happening on the banks of the Jordan River. And people make their way to him. Something important is about to happen in our lives as well.

And yet, God doesn't wait until we are all ready. God appears to us whether we are ready or not. Being ready is not for God's benefit, but for ours. Jesus Christ entered the world while we were still in sin. God did not wait for us to get it right before he appeared. Such is the nature of God's love for us. He's going to come to us whether we're prepared or not. But how wonderful for us to be able to anticipate his arrival. What a blessing for us that we have a few moments to get ourselves ready. What a great honor it is to already know something about who is about to join us. And how fortunate we are to have a chance to clean out our hearts and open them up again to receive the Christ child in all his love and glory.

Ready or not, here he comes!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.