

First Sunday of Advent, Year B, December 3, 2017:

Isaiah 64:1-9

After 200 years of Babylonian exile, the Judean people had a pent-up longing to see God come to their rescue. Remembering the stories of how God had come to their ancestors in Egyptian slavery and the subsequent desert wanderings, they long for God to come and rescue them, to put other nations in their place and to restore their broken homeland. They connect their sinfulness with God's seeming distance from them, sometimes believing God abandoned them because of their iniquities and other times, like in this passage, where it says, "because you hid yourself, we transgressed", they think that they have fallen into transgression because God first abandoned them.

Volunteers in Mission go into some places from which one would long for God to come and rescue the people—where people are living in homes made of scrap metal, rags and cardboard; where parasites literally eat away at people's energy; where hunger is a daily companion; where social structures devalue a certain segment of society. Is this a sign that God has abandoned them? Are they so sinful and are the privileged people in the U.S. so pure as to explain the difference in our living conditions? I trust you will agree that is not the explanation.

Solar Oven Partners can bring Solar Ovens, which ease some of the financial burdens from families, by reducing the need to spend limited money on cooking fuel, and even offering the opportunity to produce a supplemental income selling baked goods. Solar Ovens are an enormous boost to health by enabling people to pasteurize water, killing the parasites that slowly, but surely rob people of their vigor, their health, and, in extreme cases, even of their life. Solar Ovens reduce the need for wood to be used in cooking fuel, thereby reducing deforestation and its consequences, which include soil depletion, desertification of formally rainy climates, erosion, deadly mudslides—all of which add up to land that does not produce food. And, since Solar Ovens reduce the need for cooking over wood or charcoal, they also reduce the health effects of smoke inhalation, for the cook, her children, and even for the community. Cooking on a fire every day has the health effect of smoking cigarettes; being able to cook with clean sunlight brings the health benefits of quitting smoking.

Solar Oven Partners brings all of these benefits to the communities we serve, currently in The Dominican Republic, Sierra Leone and the Navajo Nation in Arizona. But we are not God coming to the rescue. We are in a sense, prophets, like Isaiah. Isaiah and other prophets, brought messages of God's judgement, referred to as prophecy of doom, and messages of God's mercy, referred to as prophecy of salvation. We bring a message, through the sharing of the ovens, of God's mercy; a sign that the conditions people are living in are not invisible and that the people living in these conditions are precious; a sign that points to God's love, a message that God has not abandoned them. And equally important, Solar Oven Volunteers in Mission are witnesses. Just not being forgotten and invisible is a sign that God has not abandoned God's people. Moreover, as witnesses, Volunteers in Mission return to their homes and share the story of what they have seen in their churches and communities.

We wait for Jesus' coming with hope and expectation. We already know what the coming of Jesus means: it means a calling to love our neighbor. It means re-defining neighbor from the former understanding of neighbor as someone who shares our nationality, religion or race or ethnicity to anyone of any nationality, religion, race or ethnicity, based on a sense of compassion. It means mercy for one seen as a sinner, because we are all sinners. It means a call to turn around and stay awake,

because the Kingdom of God is at hand. And, ultimately, it means the body of Christ, given for each of us and for all of us, broken that we may become whole. It calls us to be one body with all of our neighbors, bound together by love, compassion and mercy. Now, that is a prophecy of salvation indeed!

Second Sunday of Advent, Year B, December 10, 2017

Mark 1-1-8

Our gospel reading for this morning begins with the words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” And it concludes with the words, “he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In between, we have John the Baptist, described in terms that are reminiscent of the prophet Elijah, who was expected to return when the messiah was coming, and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Let’s start with “the beginning.” At first glance, it seems to be referring to the beginning of the gospel (good news) that Mark is writing about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, which will end with verse 20 of chapter 16. But I think it is the beginning of more than a book, it’s the beginning of the good news from and about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, which does not conclude at the end of Mark’s written gospel. It is on-going, even today!

This Jesus Christ, the messiah that everyone anticipated would make the nation of Israel dominant again, like it used to be in the days of Jesus’ ancestor, King David, wandered around the hinterlands of his subjugated nation and ministered with compassion to the unclean, the outcasts, the heretics, and to the criminals on the cross to his left and his right, and, ultimately, to me and to you. The good news is not what was expected—that Israel will become a powerful, dominant nation again as proof of God’s favor. Rather the good news is that God’s love is all-encompassing, not just for Israel, but for all nations. Not just for men, but for women. Not just for rich, but for poor. Not just for the wise, but for the foolish. Not just for the saints, but for the sinners. Yes, God’s love is for all, and we are empowered to share God’s love by the Holy Spirit.

The Dakotas Annual Conference established the mission “Solar Oven Partners”. We manufacture ovens that allow people to cook using only the energy of the sun, saving money, improving health and protecting the environment. Earlier this year, a team of Volunteers in Mission went out to distribute ovens on the Dominican side of the border between Haiti and The Dominican Republic. There the team met, and shared the ovens with people who live on the edge of the river in homes they have built with scraps—a little corrugated metal, a little cardboard, a blanket, some thatched leaves—whatever could be patched together. These are people who don’t have a home in any country. Many of them were born in The Dominican Republic, but their parents did not have permission to be in the country, and The Dominican Republic deemed them deportable. But, having been born in The Dominican Republic, they don’t have any Haitian documents, either, so they live right on the edge of the river that divides the two nations, in between the border enforcement check points a mile or two in from the river, beyond which they cannot pass.

Our team assembled ovens and chopped ingredients of a meal to be made in the ovens together with these “people without a country”. During the class time while the food was cooking in the sun, Rev Maria Bock of the Dominican Evangelical Church, told the participants that we had come with the ovens because God loves them, and we share in God’s love. When the Haitian Creole interpreter repeated her

words, the crowd cheered and applauded. Later, when the US Director Marj Evans-de-Carpio told them that the ovens and the pot holders were made by volunteers who care about the difficulties they face, because God's love binds us together such that when one hurts, the other hurts for them, there was another cheer and outburst of applause. The cheers and applause didn't come when an explanation was given of how much money could be saved by using the oven, nor when the many health and environmental benefits of using the oven were explained. The cheers came when we told them that we had made the ovens and potholders and come to share them out of God's love for them. This is the truly good news. When people who are too often invisible—like the people who in Jesus' time had to be kept outside of the gates of the city because they were deemed unclean—when they are valued, their humanity acknowledged and God's love is shared, this is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the good news, and it continues to this day.

Third Sunday of Advent, Year B, December 17, 2017

John 1:6-8 & 19-28

John the Baptist answered all of the Pharisees' yes-no questions, "Are you the Messiah?" "Are you Elijah?" "Are you a prophet?" with a "no" answer. Then, they finally asked an opened-ended question, "Who are you?... What do you say about yourself?" John answered by quoting the prophet Isaiah (which we read last week),

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
Make straight the way of the Lord."

The wilderness is a touch-stone to bring our minds to the Hebrew people's wandering for 40 years after escaping slavery, but prior to entering the Promised Land. And, when Isaiah used it, he was comparing the return to the Promised Land from exile in Babylon to the travel from Egypt to the Promised Land under Moses' direction. But, Isaiah is reporting that the instructions from Heaven are to build a straight way through the desert, so that the people who are in exile in Babylon will be able to return home through the otherwise treacherous desert, dangerous to travel because of lack of water, steep slopes and wild animals. This highway will ease their travel and point the other nations to see that God has the power to bring God's people home.

In John's day, people expected a Messiah that would restore the nation of Israel to its position of dominance. Instead of being one of many nations rendering tribute to Rome, many nations would render tribute to Israel, like in the age of King Solomon. John was not the messiah, but he prepared the way for the messiah. But, when the messiah came, he was not about making Israel a great nation again. And greatness was not to be obtained by being the best adherent to the outward signs of the law. The messiah who came, Jesus, was about loving our neighbors as ourselves, without distinction for ethnicity or theological correctness. The messiah, as it turned out, was about preaching good news to the poor, and recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. The messiah, as it turned out, rather than being a magnificent king to whom his subjects would bow down and pay taxes, was a servant who laid down his life for his subjects.

Advent is a time for us to evaluate the wilderness that is between us and the Promised Land and to repent of those things that are obstacles on the highway through the wilderness. We are not that different from people in John the Baptist's time. We tend to think that our group—whether it be based

on race, nationality, religious affiliation or theological stance— is the group that God will favor if we just get it right and pure enough to please God. Like people in John the Baptist's time, we are subjected to contradictory arguments, leaders who profess one thing and practice another and pressures to conform to the will of the powerful, not only in the political arena, but also in the workplace and in social situations.

We are called to prepare the way—within our own selves and as an evangelistic task—for the messiah that we know through the teachings and saving work of Jesus Christ. We are called to pave a way for the Kingdom of God that is at hand, a Kingdom where love of God and neighbor reigns supreme. On a recent trip to The Dominican Republic, the Director of Solar Oven Partners had the following experience. She and a male workshop participant who had been working with her on oven assembly, taught a woman participant how to screw together the frame of the oven. It appeared pretty obvious that she had never held a screwdriver in her hand before, as she was unfamiliar with how to hold it and how the ratcheting function works on it. But by coaching with encouragement, she got the hang of it and screwed the pieces of the wooden frame together. When she finished doing this, she exclaimed, "I can do this! I don't need a man in the house, I can do this myself! And it's a good thing, because I don't have a man in the house!"

Screwing a few pieces of wood together may not seem like the embodiment of the gospel. But when facilitating the accomplishment of this task by someone who had previously believed herself to be incapable of it, and who had seen herself as insufficient because she didn't have a man in her house, it is indeed a microcosm of the breaking in of the Kingdom of God. She—a poor single mom— experienced herself as valuable, capable, whole.

When we are experiencing ourselves as deficient, God sends a messiah, not to reign over us, but to be broken himself so that we may be made whole. Today, John calls on us to repent of all the pretensions that would prevent us from receiving this blessing, and from sharing it with others.

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B, December 24, 2017

Luke 1:47-55

During the season of Advent, we have been anticipating the coming of Jesus Christ, and the various ways that he comes to us. The Hebrews in Babylon were awaiting a messiah who would rescue them from their exile and lead them home to a restored homeland, and restore the power of their nation in relation to other nations. At the time of Jesus' birth, the Hebrew people are back in their homeland, but they are now under Roman domination. The expectations for this type of a rescuer-messiah still resonated with them.

We also anticipate the coming of the risen Christ at the end of time, and we are reminded to repent, and stay awake, keep oil in our lamps, for no one knows the day or the hour of his return.

We anticipate the initiation of the adult Jesus' ministry on earth, with John the Baptist appearing with characteristics of Elijah, whose return was expected to announce the coming of the messiah. John's ministry was already arousing the suspicion of the Jewish religious leadership, who would ultimately insist on having Jesus crucified—the perfect one being broken that we who are broken could be made whole.

And today, we remember Mary's song of praise as she grasps the meaning of the coming of Jesus, the baby to whom she will give birth. She understands that Jesus' coming is a sign of God's mercy for the weak, and of God's powerful defense against the proud and mighty of the earth. She sings, "God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts and brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." With these reversals in the social order, we are reminded of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Plain, in which he preached of blessings for the poor, the hungry, those who weep and the persecuted and woe to those who are rich, full, laughing and of whom all speak well. He would tell a parable about a rich man, who had no mercy on poor, hungry Lazarus, covered in sores, but who after death would long for a single drop of water on his tongue while the angels tended to Lazarus in heaven. He would touch the untouchables, speak to the outcasts and forgive sinners. He would invoke the ire of people in his hometown of Nazareth by pointing out that Elijah came to the aid of the foreign widow in a time of famine, passing by the many hungry widows of Israel, and the prophet Elisha, likewise, passed by the many Israeli lepers, and instead offered healing to the Syrian Na'aman. We anticipate the coming of Jesus who will reverse the fortunes, who will once and for all open God's grace to all, not just to Israel.

We in the Dakotas Annual Conference, see signs of this reversal when our Volunteer in Mission teams go out to share solar ovens with some of the neediest people in places where poverty, hunger and even persecution abound. Our teams, relative to the people with whom they are sharing the ovens, are rich and full and free from persecution. But as Volunteers in Mission, the team members go to places of poverty to be in partnership with the people they serve. The teams get the job of distributing ovens done, but never putting task over and above relationship-building. The prospective oven recipients offer their skills and knowledge as partners in the seminars, working side-by-side with the volunteers in mission to set-up the space, assemble the ovens and cook the food. And when the food is cooked, they break bread together, making sure that the hungriest are served first. This working and eating together is an integral part of the mission. It gives everyone the Kingdom of God experience of being equal partners, of being valuable and valued, of fellowship.