

November 29, 2020

“Advent Message”

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.

5 For in him you have been enriched in every way—in speech and knowledge of all kinds—

6 God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you.

7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.

8 He will also strengthen you to the end, so you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

9 God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Salton Sea shares some characteristics with, familiar from the Bible, the Dead Sea. One is that it's very salty, because like the Dead Sea, it has no exit. The water that comes in sits there until it evaporates, leaving behind all of the things that were in the water like minerals and salt. Now, the big difference between these two bodies of water is that the Dead Sea is constantly fed by the river Jordan. It has been feeding the Dead Sea for thousands of years. The current version of the Salton Sea came into being sometime around 1905. Irrigation projects along the Colorado River led engineers to dig some channels and build some dams, and at one point the project got out of control and it sprung a leak, and the leak emptied into this huge basin. It was a big leak. It took two years to plug it up. By then, the dried-up ancient lakebed on the San Andreas Fault had become a bathtub without a plug hole. There was no way to drain the water out, so it's been sitting there since that time, gradually evaporating and becoming saltier and saltier all the time. Without the river feeding the lake, it gradually started to return to what it was before the 20th century. The fish died. The plants died. Now the brackish water is disappearing.

There's another similar sea, the Caspian Sea in central Asia. It sits in a geological basin like the Sultan and the Dead Seas. It kind of comes and goes as temperature affects evaporation, and industry and farming - things are that pulling away the fresh water that once flowed into the sea. And if

November 29, 2020

“Advent Message”

unchecked, this huge body of water might someday become just a dried-up memory. Without being fed, things tend to die.

There’s a stream that flows past my hometown. My earliest memories of that stream were that it is a sulfurous, orange, toxic mine drain. I was warned very early in my life never to go near it, never to touch it, and for Heaven’s sake, don’t swim in it. There were all kinds of stories about the terrible things that happened to people who either fell in or swam in it. But the last time I saw Brush Creek, which it’s known as, it was a clean stream. It had crayfish living in it, and water plants.

The events that form the history of these water bodies are all the result of human action. Human beings did this and had an impact on these huge, massive geological and water course formations. We change the world, and not always for good. We change the world when we dig out the coal and turn the water orange with sulfur. We change the world when we change the way the water flows.

The events that build the history of these water bodies should lead us to consider we may be doing more things than imagined. They represent the results that are intended and unintended. Unintended consequences are the things that we, well, didn’t see coming, that we didn’t expect. The subtle interactions of what we do and what results from our actions play across matters of fate, too. Well-intentioned actions in the history of southern California created a swamp. All good intentions - as my grandmother always said, “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions” (she found that in the Bible). And I took it one way and over the years it suddenly occurred to me intentions also mean that you do something, and you hope that it turns out well. Sometimes we create swamps, sometimes we drain swamps. And if ignored, we can bring about deserts where once the fishes swam.

There are complaints, especially these days, about science. And science had a lot to say about the behaviors we engage in and the results, so that the unintended consequences become known to us.

November 29, 2020

“Advent Message”

We study them. We understand them. We get a better idea of how the universe works and how to behave. But people do complain because science has done something to us humans, something that is dangerous. Science has reduced us. Science first told us that we weren't the center of the universe. Now I know, I'M the center of the universe, the whole world flows around me, doesn't it?? But to find out that we're not, that the earth that we live on isn't the center of the universe. And then we find out that most of our actions are unconscious things that we share with the animals. Trying to prove what's different about human beings, science has really had a stretch. We're very similar. And we find out that we are not special in a way; that we are the result of millions of years of change and alteration to produce us in the end. So, we tend to think we're weak, and we do things that have massive impact because we have been schooled in thinking human beings can't have an effect on that.

So, are we powerful or are we weak? Is it true that our actions can change the earth in significant ways, or does the earth even pay any attention to us? I am convinced that 2,000 years ago the apostle Paul - and I have some arguments with Paul, by the way...although he did advance the cause of women at the time, he's not very friendly when it comes to women – but he did have an insight into human beings. He didn't have the science we have, so human beings had not been reduced the way they are now, but he looked at us with an interesting eye – our actions, our consequences.

Paul, who wrote this letter, was unaware of all the power and the folly that we seek. His grasp of the world was primitive and his thoughts about what we are was formed by Greek philosophy and Jewish folk wisdom. If you asked Paul what a human being is, he would give you a classic, traditional answer. If you asked Paul WHO we are, not WHAT we are, his answer would coincide with ours. We are in a muddle, we are confused, we are capable of doing amazing things, both good and bad.

Grace that he offered in this passage, to Paul, was, well, the ability to see beyond the immediate mess, to see beyond the unintended consequences and expect that some good things will kick in and

November 29, 2020

“Advent Message”

change the direction. If you are the object of that grace, it is given to you for a purpose. It is never cheap, but purposeful. God does not accidentally forgive us. Remember that – God does not accidentally forgive you. God forgives you on purpose. And why? Because we are capable. We know our place better than we used to. We know what we can and can't do and that it's hard sometimes to predict the outcomes. But Grace is given to us for a reason. God forgives us on purpose.

One of my favorite passages is from Psalm 46: “Be still and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations. I am exalted in the earth.” That stillness allows us to observe what has been done and how we affect the earth around us, how we affect our home. It gives us a chance to look at our fellow human beings through the eyes of our Creator. Be still and know.

Future generations will know the results of our intentions. Some went awry and some didn't, and with God's grace they'll be able to criticize us as we criticize our predecessors. We can only guess what they'll have to say about us. But like Paul, we may not know WHAT they may be, but we know about them. We know that they will be like us. We know that they, too, will wonder about their place in the universe. That they, too, will need grace and they will create peace.

The second of Paul's two blessings is connected to the first. Without grace there can be no peace. Admitting that we are as perfectly capable of getting it wrong as those on the other side allows us to experience grace.

Why does God forgive us? Why grace rather than vengeance? The grave is a peaceful place, but that is not what we were made for. We are made for peace because God forgives us on purpose.

Let us pray: Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed, O Lord. The night is far gone, the day is near. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.