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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Advent 3B – December 13, 2020
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Did you notice something different this morning as we lit the Advent wreath? We lit the pink candle, the candle of JOY. This is Gaudete Sunday – the Sunday of rejoicing. These past weeks we have been focusing on the longing, “The Lord is coming.” But this week, as we get closer to our celebration of Christmas, to “The Lord is near.”

John is a different character this week, too. He is not the wilderness man, eating locusts and clothed in camel’s hair. And he is not actually baptizing. He is the witness to the light. John stands before the religious leaders of the day and tells them that he is the forerunner of the one who is the light. John isn’t the light, he is not the Messiah, he is not even a prophet. He is simply a witness to the one who is coming after him. He tells them that the one that he points to is already among them, but they don’t know it. I wonder, do we know it?

Our joy this morning is remembering, knowing that Christ is already among us. Even as we await the fullness of what that means. The light is here, even in the darkness.

Today’s reading is strange because we enter the reading in the middle of a cosmic announcement. Let’s listen to the opening of the Gospel that wasn’t included:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
And the word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him,
And without him not one thing came into being.
What has come into being in him was life,
And the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness,
And the darkness did not overcome it.*

This is the light to which John testifies. The light that is God, that has always been and always will be and without which nothing can exist. This light shines IN the darkness – in the face of daily death tolls and economic instability. In the face of frightening diagnoses and family troubles. In the face of our struggle to see through the darkness, the light is there. John testifies to a light that will not be overcome by darkness. Today we are bold to celebrate the light that shines in the darkness, to trust in the God of life.

But our God is not only deep in the cosmos, in the heavens far from this life we live. John testifies to the one who comes among us, who takes on flesh, becomes one of us, that we might intimately know the light. I don't think it's an accident that our Gospel passage ends with the words, "This took place in Bethany across the Jordan..." It's as if the Gospel writer wants us to understand the concrete nature of John's testimony. This one who comes after John is coming now, here, right where we are. Whether it's in Bethany across the Jordan or on St. Catherine Street in Florissant.

Advent is the precious time when we allow ourselves to step back and take stock of this joyful reality. We don't just prepare to celebrate the birth of a sweet baby in the manger some 2,000 years ago. We celebrate the inbreaking of God's reign, then and now. And we light a pink candle of joy trusting that God's ways will ultimately reign.

We hear this morning in our reading from Isaiah what God's reign promises: Good news, freedom, release, comfort, repair, a garden of righteousness. This is the Scripture that, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus claims as his own as he begins his public ministry. The reign of God that the prophets announced has come among us in Jesus. These weeks set aside for us in the Church year are a time when we ponder what that means for us and for our world. Like Mary, this is the time to treasure these things in our hearts. Not just to treasure them and feel warm and cozy, but

to let them enter in deeply, to comfort us and to disturb us. If we are honest, we can't help but see the discrepancy, the chasm, between our world and the reign of God that we are invited in to.

God's promise of salvation is meant to transform the world we live in. It's also a future promise that will be fulfilled one day when Christ returns. But this is the beauty of Advent, the joy that our God's salvation is meant to begin here and now as well. Emmanuel – God-with-us!

The promise of transforming the world can be overwhelming when we read the papers or watch the evening news, when we drive through parts of St. Louis that are shuttered and neglected. When we acknowledge that parts of our city are food deserts where fresh food is not easily available. When we recognize that just around the corner children are going to bed hungry. The litany of injustices can go on and on. And it can overwhelm us. But this work of transformation is not ours alone. It is God's work that we are invited in to.

We can only be agents of transformation if we are grounded in God. We don't start with the world; we start with ourselves. What if we read this passage from Isaiah as a love letter to us from God? How might it change us if we hear Jesus in these words promising to set us free, to comfort us, to love us beyond our hurts and sins and sorrows into full life where we are decked with garland and loved beyond our wildest imaginations? This week sit with these words. Listen to God's promise to you – that your sorrows will be turned into joy, that the broken corners of your life will be repaired, that God loves you deeply, joyously, and has made an everlasting covenant with you. Let these words be light in the darkness. Let them heal you and transform you as God wishes.

This is our starting point. It is in our own transformation that the world will be changed. As we come to know this love, as we allow Jesus to enter deep within our hearts and minds and spirits, we become a blessing for the world. Our joy in the Lord can become a transforming agent

all around us. We bring good news to the oppressed. We bind up the brokenhearted. We proclaim liberty to captives. This is our baptismal call. To enter into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that we might be bearers of the light. The joy we proclaim this morning in the lighting of our pink candle is not a cotton candy joy. It is a real, gritty, honest joy that invites us to face the brokenness in ourselves and in our world and to proclaim what we know to be true: Our God longs to heal us and to heal our world. We are the recipients of that reconciling love and we are called to be bearers of that love in our time and place. Right here. Right now. In St. Louis. In Florissant. In our families. In our schools. In our streets.

The Author Madeleine L'Engle sums it up well when she writes: "In Advent we prepare for the coming of all Love, that love which will redeem all brokenness, wrongness, hardnesses of heart which have afflicted us."

Come Lord Jesus and fill our hearts with your love.

Amen.