

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

As we enter into another season of Advent this morning, we hear again some familiar words of Scripture in our readings. While it is comforting to hear the familiar, there is also a challenge to us to reflect on what we hear in new and different ways. Over the past year as we have all continued to grow faith and in life experience and wisdom, it makes sense that we would try to hear the words of Advent and of the Christmas story with fresh ears and a different perspective. I know that, when I was much younger, I would hear things at church and interpret them from the perspective of a child. And, in hindsight, I know that I sometimes did not hear things in the way that they were intended. For example, the church choir sang a hymn one Sunday morning that included the lyrics, “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to preach good news to the poor.” What my young ears heard was, “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blonde”. I was about 7 years old at the time and I had great hopes of becoming blonde because I had asked for a blonde wig with long hair for Christmas. But what I heard in this hymn led me to believe that blondes had a lot of difficulty with their eyesight. And so, I was not entirely disappointed when I did get the wig from the Sears catalogue on Christmas morning, but it was a brunette wig. In a similar vein, we were introduced to a recorded song in Sunday school that included the refrain, “Good news, Jericho! Good news, Jericho!” My younger cousin heard it in a different way and was heard to sing out, “Gadzooks, cherry gum!” About that time in my life, I also heard the words in the Eucharistic prayer as, “Take and eat this ALL, of you”, thinking that God did not like there to be leftovers so that it was important to finish up the Communion wafers and wine and to “do the dishes” when you finished the Eucharist. I still think of that to this day when I am clearing the altar as deacon at the end of the Eucharist.

The point of all of that is to say that, on this first Sunday of Advent when we focus on the theme of hope, we should try to reflect on what we hear in our readings with an ear that is perhaps slightly more attuned to God and to God’s intentions than what we heard last year. As Anglicans, we believe that what is contained in the Bible is the word of God and

the thinking of God that was given to particular writers by God and then recorded and shared through the Old and New Testaments and through the Apocrypha. We also know that additional writings such as the Dead Sea Scrolls that have been discovered in more contemporary times contain the wisdom of God. What God has communicated to us over the centuries through such writings has a depth and richness that takes more than a lifetime to really understand. And so, while we can take comfort in the familiarity of the Advent readings and the music and the Christmas story as it unfolds over the coming month, we are also called to try to hear these things with a fuller maturity; knowing that we will not fully understand until we pass into eternal life, but working at a deeper understanding nonetheless in this life.

In broad strokes, what we have this morning in our readings is a message of encouragement. In our Old Testament passage from Jeremiah, we hear Jeremiah encouraging the people to believe that God will be faithful to them and will fulfill his promises to them in time. As a prophet, Jeremiah is speaking to the coming of one who will save them, someone who will become a leader and a visionary from the hereditary line of David. The themes of justice and righteousness are key ideas that Jeremiah connects to this coming saviour. This is where we hear the message of hope.

Likewise, our psalm reminds us that, despite all of the challenges of this life, we can rely on the fact that God can be trusted. The psalmist shares with us that the source of his own courage is grounded in that belief to trust in God always. It is in that commentary that we hear the same message of hope.

In Paul's letter to the people of Thessalonica, we hear Paul's words that very clearly tell the people that he thinks very highly of them. He also speaks about the hope that he has that the people of Thessalonica will continue to grow in stature as Christians as they take on more and more of the traits of the unchangeable character of God. Paul goes on to encourage the people to be mindful of the second coming of Christ which he believed would happen in his own lifetime. But if you read through the full letter of 1 Thessalonians, you will also see that the 4 themes of Advent – hope, peace, joy, and love – are woven throughout this message from Paul. Some modern day theologians believe that it was this

letter that inspired the Christian church to take on those 4 themes of hope, peace, joy, and love each Advent season. I actually did not know that until I started doing some research for this sermon. Armed with this new knowledge, I have definitely “heard” Paul’s message in a different way this year. Perhaps it will be the same for you if you read through 1 Thessalonians this week over a cup of tea.

At first glance, our Gospel passage seems to be more about impending disaster than about hope or encouragement. But it is in the sentence, “When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” that we find both the hope and the encouragement. We know from history that there has always been a kind of ebb and flow of human events – wars, famines, economic disasters, illnesses – but God is the constant throughout all of those events. The late theologian Herbert O’Driscoll had this to say about our Gospel reading this morning: “...if we truly believe that God is at the heart of human events, then we can experience life with confidence, knowing that all events have ultimate meaning and purpose within the mind and will of God... The great significance of this passage for us lies in the attitude that the Lord calls for: *When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*” Luke reminds us that all that was foretold by the ancient prophets will come to pass in time; that the second coming of Christ will be the day when all of God’s purposes over the centuries will be revealed and will be fulfilled. As Christians, our role in all of that is to use our lives to be a positive and constructive part of the long history of preparation that will eventually culminate in that second coming and in the end of time as we know it. We are to use our life’s energies to contribute to that idea of readiness by working to build up the body of Christ through our words and through our actions. And we use this season of Advent – this season of preparation – to reflect on what the birth and life and death and resurrection of Christ means to us as individuals and as a community. Certainly we will be using this month to prepare for our annual Christmas celebrations and traditions. But we also use this time to prepare for the bigger picture, for the return of Christ. And as we prepare, we are reminded this morning that we are also called to live in hope. Amen.