

Today we hear Jesus declare in the gospel of Luke that “the Kingdom of God is near” and “your redemption is drawing near.” We begin a year of focusing on the gospel of Luke as the church calendar turns to a new year on this First Sunday in Advent. Luke is memorable for being the narrative which includes the stories of the birth of Jesus, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Luke is unique in that the gospel has a sequel, the book of Acts. The testimony of Luke is that Jesus is the Messiah and Lord showing God’s way of ruling the world. In Jesus God’s will is at work in the world.

As we read Luke we are reminded of the promises which God made to Israel to restore the people, redeem them, save them while the kingdom takes shape. In his first sermon Jesus says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

SLIDE – REALITY CHECK

The preaching text as we begin this year in Luke drops us into the story at the point where Jesus has just arrived in Jerusalem and will be facing suffering and death. We overhear him speaking to his disciples as the weight of what it will mean to be his follower is pressing in. *Chaos, distress and confusion will happen and others will fear, but you, my disciples, will not be swayed by these things. You will stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. God is near. The promises of God will not fail.*

Jesus challenged the disciples to have the courage to see things as they are and not be caught up in anxiety. Jesus warns them in the face of things that cause many to fear, they are to fight the urge to ignore reality. They are to face what many fear with the knowledge that God’s is working to heal and save all.

SLIDE – MIGRANTS

Last month during the Sunday morning adult education time we explored the topic of the Refugee Crisis. One of the questions we dealt with was whose responsibility is it when considering the 65 million displaced people in the world today. While we talked thousands of people were moving north towards the United States from Central America. While some of us want people to deal with their problems in their own countries, other evidence suggests we are more connected to issues which cause the crisis than we might like to admit.

This week I read an article which reminded me of a truth I came to know growing up on the farm. Rain in general was good during the growing season. But on a particular day, rain might be welcomed by one farmer who needed the moisture for growth of a grain field and cursed by the neighboring farmer who was ready to bale hay.

In 1994 the North American Free Trade Agreement opened the way for the United States to flood Mexico with heavily subsidized corn and other produce. This was good for U.S. agriculture and trade. A consequence of that in Mexico was that it undercut the livelihood of two million Mexican farmers causing them to lose their land. Poverty soon set in, followed by a sharp increase in the number of gangs and drug cartels with violence not only in Mexico but spreading to Central America. Fleeing poverty and violence, there has been a tide of people desperate to flow north in the intervening years. Joyce Hollyday writing in *The Christian Century* says the U.S. response to this flood of people has been to increase the border patrol and treat migrants so harshly that others won't consider seeking refuge in the U.S. This has been the case for many years. This distress among the nations is happening around the globe.

SLIDE – G20

World leaders are gathering in Buenos Aires, Argentina for the Group of 20 Summit. The goal is for a spirit of dialog and cooperation concerning issues of development, infrastructure and food security. This time there is more talk of conflicts between the leaders than cooperation. What can get left behind when conflict is the focus is the opportunity for a more just world. Conflict increase the distress among the nations.

SLIDE-GLOBAL REPORT

The latest report on the climate of Planet Earth created by thirteen Federal agencies indicates strong warnings for immediate action to address the effects of global warming. As I was listening to reports I was struck by the history of the scientific endeavor. The National Climate Assessment grew out of the Global Change Research Act of 1990 which was supported by President George Herbert Walker Bush. Almost 30 years ago the political leaders of our parties saw the need for regular evaluation, every four years, so that needed actions could change the course of warming the planet and instead heal the earth. Today it is more difficult to find common ground.

Can it be any worse that all these things which cause us to fear other people or fear the loss of our own personal freedoms? According to Jesus “Yes.” In Luke’s account the whole shake up is due to the kingdom of God coming near. The coming of God means that the old will pass away. All that we have will pass away. To lose all, what we have considered as our own and have come to love weighs us down. God will come as judge of our whole lives. Our sin will be clear. The scripture tells us the True God is near. But we want God to approve of the way we have been living. Yet God comes to create life in the midst of our chaos and sin. God will put to death that which does not lead to the divine life.

SLIDE-IN CHRIST, NEW

CREATION

Since we are weighed down with the chaos of our lives and the problem of sin, we need a Savior. Jesus promises the Son of Man comes on a cloud with power and great glory. Your redemption is drawing near. Jesus will redeem the disciples and us. Jesus came as a human being, weighed down by the chaos of the world and our sin. Jesus carried that burden to the cross, dying the death that was ours. Then the powers of the heavens were shaken, and God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus took on the judgment of God, the power of death, and not only overcame them but ended them. Jesus is greater than all these powers. His disciples and all who follow him can take comfort in the knowledge that Jesus will protect them. There is now no need to fear.

Jesus is our life. Jesus is the one who gives us life even though the nations are distressed, chaos still happens and we experience death. What we own is not our life. The power to keep what we have is not our life. Health is not our life. Jesus, the Son of Man is our life. And life in Jesus is always being made new.

Some invitations are in order as we begin this Advent season so that we are not overwhelmed. The first is to seek the truth about our human life together. As last month’s study on the Refugee Crisis proved, global issues will not be simply solved. But when we keep with it and listen to all the various voices, I trust that there can be progress.

The second invitation is to wait. Eugene Peterson has said that the Christian Life is “a long obedience in the same direction.” Pursuing faith, forgiveness, divine love,

compassion and reconciliation is way Jesus describes for us in the scriptures. The secular world would have us speed past things, always on to the next, in search of the next best thing that might satisfy us. But that is not the Advent invitation. Our counsel in Advent is to be patient, to pray, to learn, to converse not only with God but one another. Meanwhile the Spirit gives us what we need.

SLIDE-STAND UP, HOLD HEAD

HIGH

The Spirit gives us faith in Jesus, so that we raise our heads and stand, instead of being eternally weighed down under our despair. The nations may be disturbed, but that is not the last word. Jesus is our life and our redeemer, loosening us from the grip of despair. We may be diagnosed with a disease, but the Spirit gives us Jesus, and in Jesus we can stand up, trusting in the presence of Jesus and the promise of God for wholeness. We may know fear, but it does not overwhelm us when we move out of it, exploring the larger stories of our common life.

SLIDE – HOUSE BUILDING

A final invitation is to notice where God is working in your life and where God is prodding you to go. To be sure God's will is at work in this world, loosening and releasing people from captivities. Much of that happens through the work of our hands on behalf of others. This fall's God's Work Our Hands day of service was a great witness but here at St. John's many hands have continued to be at work, feeding the hungry, knitting hats and gloves, gathering food and gifts, loving, having compassion on others, and finding ways to lift others up. God bless you this Advent season.