



The Fourth Sunday of Advent (A)
December 22, 2019
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† O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, “God with us”, and open our minds and hearts to the knowledge and love of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.

It would come as no surprise to many of us that holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter can be times of intense loneliness for many people: Those suffering from broken relationships; those who have lost loved ones [, those alone in nursing homes or hospitals; those facing life-threatening health issues; those for whom life has lost meaning or those sleeping in dark corners of city streets. These are just a few examples of the flip side of seasons of joy and celebration.

I recently encountered a New York Times article entitled, “Want to get into the Christmas spirit? Face the Darkness”. Indeed, we find ourselves in the darkest time of the year. I have to admit that the absence of days with sunshine is very difficult for me and perhaps for some of you as well. However, sunlight is only part of the story. Darkness in life seems present in too many ways.

The author of the New York Times article wrote: “Our response to the wrongness of the world (and of ourselves) can often be an unhealthy escapism, and we can turn to the holidays as anesthesia from pain as much as anything else. We need collective space, as a society, to grieve—to look long and hard at what is cracked and fractured in our world and in our lives. Only then can celebration become deep, rich and resonant, not as a saccharine act of delusion but as a defiant act of hope.” (Tish Harrison Warren, “Want to Get into the Christmas Spirit? Face the Darkness,” *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/30/opinion/sunday/christmas-season-advent-celebration.html>)

I think that many of us gathered here today would agree that we live in a “cracked and fractured” world, a world we cannot escape, as hard as we might try. Politics alone over the past week, blanketing the news in print, online and on the air, should give us pause.

The escalating climate crisis as chronicled by scientists around the world should give us pause. Deaths by gun violence should give us pause. Facing the demons of our lives head-on for what they are and how they impact us and others should give us pause. But we are not alone. The Scriptures frequently give us scenarios of cracked and fractured worlds in need of healing and wholeness.

In Isaiah, King Ahaz in the world he had created and found himself was a mess. God offered Ahaz God’s self in hope that Ahaz would respond positively. Ahaz rejected the offer.

The passage tells us: “The Lord spoke to Ahaz”, suggesting that God would give Ahaz a sign. Ahaz replied: “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” Ahaz had been known to worship false gods and even to sacrifice children to those gods. So, it is curious that Ahaz’s response is a kind of two-edged sword: No to ask for a sign and no to putting God to the test, as if Ahaz could put God to a test. (For more detailed information, see: https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/464021/jewish/King-Ahaz.htm)

Through Isaiah, the prophecy of the One to come is the sign God offered Ahaz. For us as Christians, we embrace that message as well. Isaiah tells us, “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel”. (Isaiah 7:10-16)

Today’s Gospel tells us that Emmanuel means “God with us”. Note, the word, “us” and not “me”. God poured God’s self into the world for us.

Another passage from Isaiah beautifully set by Handel in 1741 often rings in my ears at this time of the year: “For unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given...” (Isaiah 9:6) It is unto *us* to whom God came into the world breathing God’s very self into creation in the person, “Jesus”. Today, our Gospel describes how that came about. (Matthew 1:18-25)

I believe one of the powerful aspects of this passage from Matthew deals with an angel speaking to Joseph in a dream and then Joseph’s response: “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...”

Would that we would fall into deep sleep and hear the voice of God through the mouthpiece of an angel! But wait! An angel is simply the grace of God given to us as creatures of God. God is with us, in us and through us. Perhaps questions, then, are how do we listen for the God’s voice and what do we need to do to enable that listening and hearing to take place?

I believe we are here this morning shortly before Christmas Eve because we long to listen and to hear. We long to hear the voice of God in the midst of life, so that we can embrace the Good News of Jesus and be heralds of the Gospel to those in need.

Before we celebrate the birth of Jesus, perhaps we might consider the reality of the world in which we live and commit to making that world a better place. Soon, we will stand before the crèche with a figure of Jesus within it. Perhaps, we might consider it a “defiant act of hope”.

How can we be a people of hope, a people for whom light shatters darkness? How can we be a people for whom Jesus is the breath of God encompassing the reality of life even when we can’t feel it or see it?

The Church teaches *us* that the breath of God is in us and all around us through the power of the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit enabled Isaiah to be the great prophet we claim him to be. That same Spirit enabled Mary to say “yes” to bear the Son of God. The Spirit enabled Joseph to act with integrity to embrace the mission to which he was called in life.

The Spirit enables us to hear God’s Word, be nourished at the Table of Life, and to benefit from the community gathered Sunday after Sunday. Here, the Church helps us respond to the signs God gives us in and through Jesus, our Brother, Redeemer and Friend and one another.

We can give thanks for the hope which is ours in Jesus. It is hope which will enable a “deep, rich and resonant” celebration at Christmas. It is hope which enables us to be a transformative presence of God wherever we find ourselves. Amen.