



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 17, 2017
ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11; PSALM 126; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24; JOHN 1: 6-8, 19-28

ADVENT PARADOXES

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 *[The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.]*

Fleming Rutledge was one of the first women to be ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church four decades ago. She is now retired, but continues to be known for her theological writings and deft preaching, and for her courage and

pioneering spirit that helped break a glass ceiling.

She says the best Christmas card she has ever received came in 1968, from the Catholic Interracial Council of the Twin Cities. I

presume she had given them money at some point, and were on their list.

The front of the card was colorful and bright, with hues of red and orange radiating across the card, a vibrant sunrise, with the first half of a verse from the Benedictus, one of the ancient, beautiful and beloved canticles of our tradition. It read: “From on high our God will bring the rising sun...”

And then she opened the card to find a stark black-and-white photo of a small African-American child sitting listlessly in the shadows of a slum courtyard with a ray of sunshine streaking into his small orbit. The second half of the verse reads: “to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.”

The stark contrast between front cover and inside of the card startled her. I suppose it would us all, but as I read her reflection on that card recently, it gave me pause to consider how Advent holds these two faces in tension.ⁱ

The rest of that verse from the Benedictus, in slightly different translation, goes like this:

In the tender compassion of our God,

the dawn from on high shall break upon us

To shine on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death

And to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Advent does not shy away from the fact that our reality is not as God intended—children are sitting in darkness and the shadow of death. And yet, at the same time, we lean into this expectant hope that God is breaking into the world in new and wonderfully healing ways.

You may also have noticed that Advent brings a lot of references to sin. Even our collect today launches a plea to God: “because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us.”

It’s enough to stir us up, and not in a good way. But Fleming Rutledge offers a remarkable reflection on the nature of sin, which is so often misunderstood, when it is used to judge others—those sinners!—or to feel the projection of others’ judgment on us. We miss the point when it is externalized in either direction.

Rutledge suggests that sin is a theological term of incompleteness, of brokenness, of missing the mark, that can only be understood in reference to God’s prevailing mercy and steadfast love for us. But here’s the remarkable part: when one becomes aware of being trapped by sin, of being sorely hindered by sin, they also discover they are already delivered from that sin by the mercy of steadfast love of God. It is radically liberating good news, because it is always referential to God’s prevailing delight in shining mercy and love into the darkness.ⁱⁱ

This is the Third Sunday of Advent, traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday, or Rose Sunday, or Rejoicing Sunday, and our readings and hymns draw on this theme of hopeful turning into God's restorative justice and peace, without ever forgetting the brokenhearted and downtrodden. Isaiah's poetic thrill and the psalmist's delightful sonnet invite us into a lyrical joy without denying the lamentable suffering that has been experienced and still lingers today.

But then we still hear from John the Baptist, who would not make the shortlist for anyone's invitees to a fun-filled dinner party. With courage and a pioneering spirit, he stood squarely between two worlds of oppressors and oppressed and fiercely spoke the truth, using of all things, apocalyptic language. It got him killed, but he remained true to his calling throughout, and the world changed forever as a result. The pattern is there for us as well.

It was quite a remarkable thing two weeks ago, when I mentioned that one in four children at Lowell Elementary nearby were homeless and that we were gathering food for them, and gifts for them and others through Mary's Place and Casa Latina.

The response was overwhelming. 110 gift tags were claimed by you that day, and you've returned those gifts, plus hundreds of pounds of food for those children and their families to eat during their Christmas break from school.

I thank you for your generosity. It was a heart-warming thing to see, but let's not leave it at a level of one-offs, however well-intended; let's think in transformative terms. I know many of you already are.

If you found joy in giving, then I'd say you're living headlong into this Gaudete Sunday—we rejoice because we can orient to the promise that God is up to something here, in the midst of dark times, and is inviting us to join that divine in-breaking, so that those who sit in darkness or the shadow of death might experience the good news, and might have their broken hearts bound up.

Of course, one gift or a can of soup won't win the day, but maybe it can be a bit of the oil of gladness about which Isaiah speaks, and perhaps the place God is calling you to is where your deep gladness meets the world's hunger. The question then is, will we go there, and what will we discover there if we do. I would suggest we have as much to discover about ourselves in the process, and engaging in that work will surely change the world. It is, of course, the harder row to hoe.

This season of Advent, with its readings and hymns and patient persistence to see the world through God's eyes, as broken yet beloved, as reeling yet redeemable, and always tethered to an arc of divine hope—this season of Advent stands squarely in critique of sentimentality, the sort that makes Christmas little more than saccharine

sweet pretending that everything is simply peachy in the world, at least for a day.

Advent defies such shallow toe-dipping, and invites us to dive headlong into the paradoxical and unsettled tension of embracing the world's suffering even while rejoicing that God is up to something here and now.

Hold this space of Advent with great intention, live in the paradoxical reality of now and not yet, of waiting yet hastening, of judgment and deliverance, of sin's sore hindrance and God's goodness and mercy, of suffering and joy, and know that if you do, if you do hold this space, the tender compassion of our God will break in as a new dawn dispersing the darkness, and your world, the world, will change forever.

ⁱ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-07/two-faces-advent>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hg50KEoiDsU>



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