

3rd Sunday of Advent – Year B – 12/13/2020 – Pr. Jill Henning

Greetings from Bishop Kevin Strickland and the Southeastern Synod Staff on this Third Sunday of Advent. As the candles grow on our Advent wreaths, we come this Sunday with questions.

Who ARE you?” they challenged him. Are you the messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you (at least) some kind of prophet? No? Then who are you to be claiming the promise of Isaiah? Who are you to be baptizing people?

Who are you indeed? Who are you to be standing in the pulpit and preaching the good news? Who are you to be proclaiming God’s forgiveness? Who are you?

Not the messiah, that’s for sure. Not Elijah either, last time I checked. And yet, here I stand. Here WE stand, claiming that brokenness and that sustenance, week after week. Here we stand, ready to call down the fullness of God’s grace. Here we stand, claiming hope in the midst of uncertainty, light in the midst of gloom, courage in the midst of fearfulness. Claiming it for ourselves.

Claiming it for each other. Claiming it for the world.

Who are we? We are signposts! We point the way, just as John dared to point the way. He too came as a voice crying in the middle of what seemed a vast wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord!” And this week we hear

more of what Isaiah proclaims to be the way of the Lord: bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming 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. Isaiah is not just speaking generalities about the year of the Lord's favor here; he's picking up Leviticus 25. Freedom, release and recompense are the hallmarks of the biblical Year of Jubilee, that profoundly radical reset button for the distribution of wealth, land and freedom. Intended as a hedge against extreme concentration of wealth (and the accompanying corruption), these very detailed laws call for the return of lands and property to their original owners, and the freeing of Israelite indentured servants at the end of the 49th or 50th year.

Now, it's hard to know how often and with what rigor these laws were ever followed in Israel (though they were not the only land in the Ancient Near East with such a concept of regular redistribution). Some scholars believe this a purely utopian idea that was NEVER followed. And certainly it's not one of the passages cited with any enthusiasm by many, supposedly biblical churches, in the modern day. But there it is in Leviticus. There it is, echoed by Isaiah when he looks forward to the coming of the way of the Lord. And here John the Baptist stands, raising the standard once again to proclaim that this is still God's dream!

It's what John does. He is the signpost. He is the town crier. He is the one who prepares, the one who promises, the one who warns, the one who does not, WILL not forget the dream of God.

And not only does he remember, but he has the courage to proclaim the dream of God with great assurance! See how he stands in the midst of the story, in the middle of the wilderness, far from the seats of power, crying. He puts his whole being into it, entering into this new reality so fully that people, well, people probably think he's a little crazy.

[He does seem a little crazy, to be honest...]

He isn't the Messiah. He is not the one who will bring these things about, who will make God's dream real. Except, well, in the ways that he does: He sows seeds. He performs signs. He baptizes people in the river to prepare them for a new life. He gathers a crowd and sets the stage.

He prepares the way. And he cries out for us to prepare the way too: to make a way in our hearts, and a way in this world for the in breaking of God. So, as I asked before: Who are WE, to be doing these things? Take a look around ... we might not be clothed in skins and eating locusts, but I'm thinking we're just about ragtag and ill-behaved enough to be signposts of the kingdom of God, just like John.

Because you have to unbutton just a little. You have to be aware of your own need, in order to be expectant, in order to yearn for God. You have to be broken, to let in the light of that star: the star that leads you into God's dream, into God's surprise, into God's blessing and delight.

When we do this: when we claim the promise and dream of God, we too begin to prepare the Way. We do it by proclaiming blessing and grabbing hold of hope. We do it by preaching love and practicing forgiveness. We do it by living in generosity and reaping harvests of gratitude.

And frankly, that makes US look a little crazy too, which is one of the nice things about doing it in community: it's less lonely and you've got more cover that way! But more importantly, we do it together because it's the only way we CAN do it! Because there will be times when the faith of every last one of us will waver. Our hope will die and our vision will dim. And if we were all alone, that might be the end of the journey for us. We would give up and go home to dream the regular dreams of regular people.

But we are not alone: beside us, a brother or sister stands. And they might be filled with joy, or they might well be hurting too, but somehow God's spirit still flows through them. So their voice cries out for both of you, for all of us: proclaiming the dream of God. Claiming the promise for us and all people!

We are on a journey together, walking in the light of the star. And as we walk, John the Baptist calls to us, urging us to be signposts for others along the way. What would you have to do in your life to claim the dream of God more fully?

..... What could we do, as individuals and as a community to point more clearly toward Christ? How might we overflow with an offering of baptismal waters: inviting people in, refreshing them, and offering them new life, perhaps a second chance? So many ways, only some of which I can imagine. Let's imagine together, dream together, prepare the way together. And just to remind us of the blessing and joy that this work will bring, let's welcome Christ, Emmanuel to be born in us.

Let me close with a blessing the Bishop shared this past week by Sister Ruth Fox with our Retired Rostered Ministers during our annual gathering.

May God bless you with discomfort

At easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships.

So that you may lie deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger

At injustice, oppression and exploitation of people

So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears

**To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
And turn their pain into joy.
And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor
In the name of the Triune God. Amen
May God answer this prayer in our lives today and everyday.**