

Sermon 11-29-09

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 1:5-25

The Importance of Place: Jerusalem

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” We hear these words from the prophet Jeremiah and we are reminded of what this season is all about. We come to Advent, not to rush from Thanksgiving, through Black Friday, to get to Christmas, but to take a moment out of the hustle and bustle of this season to take stock of where we are in our lives. Advent is a time for reflection and preparation; to reflect upon the promises of God and where we fit into the larger story of God’s salvation and to prepare for what lies ahead of us as disciples of Jesus Christ. The reality is we need this season and this time to stop, to take a break, to sit back and be bathed in the glorious promises of God so that we are reminded of our true task as disciples and the direction our lives are supposed to be focused. To help us in this task throughout the Advent season, we’ll be focusing on the importance of place.

When we approach scripture, we often pay attention to the people in a narrative, the things happening around them, and the overarching story, but we don’t always take time to reflect upon where something is happening. The story of God’s salvation is always viewed through the lens of location. The story of Moses makes no sense unless we know that it takes place in Egypt. In a similar way, we cannot understand the story of Joseph without recognizing that it begins in Canaan and ends in Egypt. We can’t understand our passage from Jeremiah without realizing that he is speaking to a people who have been exiled from their homeland nor can we understand our passage from Luke if we don’t know where it is taking place.

Luke’s gospel opens with a sense of longing, a sense of preparation. The people of God have been waiting for the promises of God to be fulfilled. Gathered at the temple in Jerusalem, the great city, the people of God lift their hearts in prayer; anticipating the time when the promise of salvation, the promise of fulfillment would come to fruition. Into the midst of that sense of anticipation steps Zechariah.

We're told by Luke that Zechariah is on rotation with a number of other priests, currently serving the Lord in Jerusalem. Along with his wife, Elizabeth, we discover that the couple is blameless before God; living the way God's people should live. Yet there's one catch: Zechariah and Elizabeth have been unable to conceive or bear children. This isn't an age where a surrogate mother can be paid to bear children for you, for whatever reason, this couple were never able to have children and now, they were too old to even begin to think about it. While Zechariah and Elizabeth saw this condition as disgraceful, for barrenness was thought to be divine punishment, God had other plans for these truly righteous people. Just as Abraham and Sarah were unable to have children because of old age and barrenness, Elizabeth and Zechariah appear to be in the same boat. Yet, like Abraham and Sarah, "the narration of barrenness itself becomes the grounds for anticipating the gift of a child;" that the whole world would receive a great gift through the womb of Elizabeth, just as the world received a gift through Sarah.

Zechariah was chosen by lot to offer the evening incense within the temple. This area within the temple was right next to the Holy of Holies; that location where only the high priest could enter on the Day of Atonement. As Zechariah was going about his duties, a large crowd gathered to pray. Just then, the Angel of the Lord appeared, terrifying Zechariah saying, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife will bear you a son and you will name him John." Just as the angel of the Lord proclaimed to Abraham that Sarah would bear a son and name him Isaac, so with Zechariah a similar proclamation is made. And this son, the one who will be named John, is special. For even in the name, John, is the promise that "God is gracious." The Spirit of the Lord is upon John even before his birth; he will turn many of the people to the Lord their God. He is to go before the Lord, to make ready a people who are prepared for the Lord. Whew!

Can you imagine the astonishment Zechariah experienced? To find out in an instant that you will have a son, but more than that, that this son will go before the Lord; preceding the Lord and preparing the way of the Lord amongst the people of the world. Could Zechariah even surmise that this child would become a prophet of God? Yes, John is a prophet of the Lord God, the prophet who goes before the Lord;

crying out, "Prepare the way of the Lord." John doesn't prophecy of future events nor does his birth; rather through him the word of the Lord is made known. Through John we come to know that we should listen for that Word of the Lord. The Word whom we anticipate even now in this advent season; the Word of God who both promises to be with us even now but also promises that he will come again to reconcile all things to himself.

In that moment within the temple at Jerusalem, we discover that the prayers of the people and the prayers of Zechariah are joined together. In the announcement of John's conception and birth we come to learn that the time of waiting is over; the coming of the Lord is nigh and soon all Israel (and by extension the whole world) will know that the Lord reigns. In the midst of the great city of Jerusalem, the words of Jeremiah are fulfilled. At that place, we come to know that the promises of God are true and worthy of full acceptance.

Awaiting promises is never an easy thing. Often we get frustrated with anticipation and the like because we want things to happen instantaneously, or at least as quickly as possible. For instance, I know that I am the worst person in the world to shop for this time of year. It's become an ingrained habit that whenever I see something on sale that I can use, I pick it up. It all started when I first began living on my own. Now, I frustrate my wife and my family because anticipation is not always a comfortable place for me to be. But as much as I struggle with this, I hear the call of Advent to slow down, to enter into a season of prayer and preparation, and to anticipate the fulfillment of God's promises wherever I find myself. And that's my call for each one of you this Advent season.

In the name of our Lord and Savior, I urge you to take time out of the midst of this season for preparation. Spend time with the scriptures, not just a line here or a line there but really spend time in the scriptures. Spend time in prayer, even if you don't feel like it, make daily prayer a habit in your lives. Look forward to the coming of our Lord as he fulfills all his promises. We take so many things around us for granted, yet like Zechariah and those gathered at the temple, we should spend time within the glorious tension of anticipation; slow down and take stock of where you are in the midst of your

discipleship. I urge you to take time out of the midst of the season, stealing minutes here and there, maybe even hours, but take time reflecting on what this season is all about. Not rushing to the manger as quickly as you can, but taking time to reflect on what it means to be prepared for the Lord's coming; reflecting on what it means that God will work through various places to make his glory known.

Zechariah waited for the promises of the Lord to bear fruit in his life, and that fruit was known in the promise of his son John. Yet in that moment, Zechariah's hope for the future was caught up with all those gathered in Jerusalem as they awaited the coming of the Lord for the salvation of the world. Like those who have come before us, let us stand on the promises of God; hoping in the midst of this Advent season that God's glory will be made known in the places where we live and dwell and await the fulfillment of God's promises for each one of our lives. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.