

ADVENT REFLECTIONS

The Third Week of Advent

Sunday December 13

Amos 9:1-15

Much of the Prophet Amos' message could be misinterpreted as doom and gloom—indeed for many if not most it turned out to be bad news. But there is a sense in which God's news is *only* Good News; it's just that sometimes we don't want to hear it. Maybe we think it will mean a change in our life; maybe it seems like it will cost too much; maybe we are just plain stubborn.

Yet this passage from Amos is overflowing with hope. "The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when the one who ploughs will overcome the one who reaps." What wonderful Advent news. Whether we are sowing well or poorly (and it does make a difference!), the One who ploughs is coming. God is patient but persistent and He has promised His people that their fortunes will be restored, their ruined cities rebuilt, and they will be planted in the land and "never again be plucked up."

On this Sunday of Joy, let's hold onto this promise. And let's live today knowing that this is true, that this is where the world is headed. So, saved by God's Son and empowered by God's Spirit, we can be the kind of people who restore the fortunes of others, who rebuild that which has been broken down, and who plant ourselves in such a way that we are "not of the world" but yet here in this world as people of the Kingdom of God. Where do you need to know this hope in your life? Where might God be calling you to extend this hope to others?

Monday December 14

Revelation 3:7-13

In the letters to the seven churches, only Smyrna and Philadelphia do not receive rebuke. Though they are weak, they have kept Jesus' word and not denied Him, and so Jesus commends them. It appears that there were Jews in Philadelphia who were making the false claim that they, not the Christians, were the true holy people of God, thus inferring that they alone had salvation. Jesus tells them, "Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut..."

In response to what they were enduring, Jesus wanted the Christians in Philadelphia to know that He had made them members of His people and no one could take that away from them.

Knowing that we have access to the Kingdom of God, entrance into salvation, by the grace of our Savior Jesus is meant to encourage us also. He sets the open door before us and no one can shut it, no one can take that grace from us. We are to be confident and assured in our faith. Sometimes, we might feel like the Christians in Philadelphia: weak and powerless. We can feel frail in faith and unsure of God's love for us and power in us. The door, though, is open, and that is truth meant to bring us joy, hope, and power!

Tuesday December 15

Revelation 3:14-22

The Lord had strong words for the church in Laodicea. They were lukewarm, and so the Lord threatened to spit them out of His mouth – they were sickening to Him! So what is it that Jesus is trying to say?

Archaeology has shed great light on this imagery. The city of Laodicea was near hot springs and was supplied water in the summer by an aqueduct. The hot waters were of great benefit for healing. Cold, clean water obviously brought refreshment and life. But the lukewarm waters of the aqueduct were filled with impurities. To the Laodiceans, Jesus was saying, “You are of no benefit to anyone!” You do not bring healing and life to the world, but rather, you are filled with impurity.

The main problem at Laodicea, as it turns out, was that they were blind. They claimed to have everything, to be spiritually rich. In reality, though, they were filled with impurity and were, “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” They looked great on the outside, but were not filled with the presence and power of Jesus. They were complacent and self-deceived. Jesus was offering them the opportunity to see themselves through His eyes.

What a powerful challenge! Are there places in our own lives, or in the life of our parish, where we need to be cleansed of impurity and see ourselves through Jesus’ eyes?

Wednesday December 16

Revelation 4:1-8

After receiving the Lord’s assessment of the seven churches, John is ushered into the very throne room of the Almighty God. In highly symbolic language, we catch a glimpse of heavenly worship. Gathered around the throne, we are told, were the twenty-four elders, clad in white garments. These twenty-four represent the fullness of God’s people, the twelve tribes of the Old Testament and the twelve apostles of the New Testament. Also around the throne are the four living creatures, representing the whole created order.

So here, in God’s presence, are His people. They are clothed, John says, in white garments and are wearing golden crowns. As the whole scene comes together, we should be powerfully struck by this unlikely sight. Here in the presence of the Holy and Almighty God are His people, whom He has made fit to be in His presence!

It seems to me that until we understand what it means to say that God is holy, we really can’t understand how incredible His saving grace is. To say that God is holy is to say that He is not only perfect, but utterly other than we are. Sin can no more be in His presence than darkness be in the presence of light. This holy God is bright unapproachable light. And yet...

And yet He not only makes us able to be in His presence, He makes us *worthy* to be in His presence. And He not only makes us worthy to be in His presence, He puts crowns on our heads and invites us to join in His loving and righteous rule over the universe. Only God would dream of such a thing! Only God could make it happen!

Thursday December 17

Revelation 4:9 – 5:5

After the heights of this incredible worship around the very throne of God, John comes crashing down to the depths of sorrow. The Father, seated on the throne, is holding a sealed scroll: His plan of judgment and redemption, His plan for the Kingdom. But there is no one worthy and able to execute that plan, so John wept and wept.

This is, as one scholar says, *the* great horror, that the prayer, “Thy Kingdom come,” goes unanswered. This weeping leads to searching questions. Are we so concerned for the coming of the Kingdom? Do we so long for God’s Kingdom that we would weep bitterly at the thought that it might not come? John so lived for the glory of God that this was his greatest horror. Do we?

Thanks be to God that the vision does not end here. “The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered...” Jesus, by His death and resurrection, is the one by whom the Kingdom of God is coming. Our prayer is answered! What good news of great joy!

Friday December 18

Matthew 25:14-30

In this well known parable, three servants are entrusted with “talents” as their master leaves for a season. Two servants use their talents well and are commended, the third does nothing with his talent and is condemned. For many people, this parable seems to be a frightening teaching that our “job performance” is the determining factor in inheriting eternal life. But that isn’t really what Jesus is saying.

A talent was a sum of money, a stock portfolio if you will. These servants were not so much being entrusted with the money as they were being entrusted with using the money in accordance with their master’s will. They were expected, like a stock broker today, to make it grow. Two servants faithfully used the money properly, the other did nothing with it. Why? That gets to the heart of the matter.

“I knew you to be a hard man...so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” The issue is not the yield on the investment, not how much they got back, but how they saw their master, and consequently what they thought the money was for. The unfaithful servant does not trust the goodness or love of his master, so in fear he clutched onto the talent and did nothing with it. In the end, it wasn’t how much the first two servants earned, but their faithfulness to try that mattered.

As we draw ever nearer to Christmas and to the return of our Savior, we are to be found busy doing the work of our Master, using everything He has given us in accord with His will and to His glory. One thing this parable reminds us of is that who we know our Master to be will shape how we treat all that He has given us. Do you know the love and grace of God in a way that leads you to freely use all that He has given you according to His will? Do you know God in a way in which you can live knowing that God is not so much interested in whether or not we “succeed,” but simply that we, for the love and trust of Him, try?

Saturday December 19

Matthew 25:31-46

In this stunning passage, Jesus tells us that when he comes in glory, “[a]ll nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” What will be the criteria for this great moment of judgment? On what basis will this separation be made?

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Some will say: Lord, how and when did we do this? Others: Lord, how and when did we fail to do such things? Jesus answers

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

As we approach the day in which we celebrate the Coming of the Lord, the Incarnation in which God became flesh and dwelt among us, we do well to remember that we cannot pretend to love God while we ignore the needs of those around us. As John the Beloved writes,

“If any one says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.”
(1 John 4:20-21)

We might be tempted to fall back on a false triumph of faith over works in order to squeeze our way around this ‘hard teaching.’ Instead, remember that by the grace of God we have been given “Christ Jesus,” in whom there is only “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). It is Jesus that unites us to the estranged, the poor, the broken-hearted, even our enemies; it is He that fills us with His Holy Spirit that we might love Him and our neighbors; it is Jesus, the King. Let us “do it” to Him!