

**3 Advent
December 13, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This is the Third Sunday of Advent. This Sunday is about promise and hope ... even in the darkness. And this Sunday, especially when we read this portion of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, holds some powerful memories for me. I will get to that in a moment, but first ...

On Monday of this week, I was honored to give the invocation at the St. Augustine City Commission meeting ... it was the occasion of the swearing-in of the Mayor and two City Commissioners. The prayer from that meeting can be found through a link in our email newsletter ... the Voice ... however, I had contemplated adding to the prayer a moment of silence for those who have died in the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of those individuals was someone's mother or father, sister or brother, son or daughter, spouse, close friend, or neighbor. It seemed to me that giving one second of silence for each individual ... less time than it usually takes to say their name ... was the least one could do.

However, if we observed a moment of silence ... one second for each individual ... who died from COVID-19 around the world ... over 1.6 million people ... it would take over two-and-a-half weeks. If it were observe a one-second moment of silence just for those in the United States ... as the number gets close to 300,000 deaths ... it would take three-and-a-half days. If we were to observe a moment of silence ... one second at a time ... for those in Florida who have died of COVID-19 it would take us five-and-a-half minutes. A moment of silence ... one that truly honored those who have died ... at the City Commission meeting on Monday evening would have exceed my time allotment, so I offered an incomplete prayer.

In this latest surge of this horrible disease, more people are dying each day than died in the terrorist attack on 9/11. Many of those people are dying alone. Their families are devastated with grief. The healthcare workers who are taking care of the sick are physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted. And, even those in our society who are not sick with the disease are feeling the effects of the pandemic ... unemployment and its economic effects ... the stress of confinement ... the loss of community.

You know this all too well. You live with it every day, just like I do. Fortunately, there have been only a few cases of people in the St. Cyprian's community who have tested positive for COVID-19, or who have been ill from the disease ... and those who have

been ill with COVID-19 have recovered well. Yet, I hear from parishioners almost daily about their family members who are ill ... some seriously ... and others who have tested positive and are anxiously waiting to see what symptoms they may have.

Our prayers for these people ... all of them around the world, and for those we know personally ... are very real. They are more than just words spoken in the Prayers of the People during our worship ... or the silence that wasn't included at the City Commission meeting ... our prayers come from deep in our hearts and souls.

This is a dark time, and it is the Third Sunday of Advent. It is also the Fourth Day of Hanukkah ... The Festival of Lights. Hanukkah remembers the miracle of the oil in the Temple lamp lasting eight days.

In our book study of Finding Jesus, Discovering Self this week, one of the newest members of the congregation told a story about being on a tour of an iron mine in Wisconsin. Deep underground the tour guide had everyone turn off their helmet lights so they could experience total darkness. Then the tour guide lit a single match, and the light filled the underground cavern.

That total darkness in the underground mine is what Advent represents, and what we are experiencing in the world around us today. That match-flame is the light in the darkness ... to light the Temple for eight days that is being celebrated at Hanukkah ... and to be the light the world with the Incarnation of Jesus at Christmas.

Even in the pitch blackness of the iron mine, one knew that the helmet lamp could be turned back on, yet the match-flame made a point about how just a little bit of light can overcome total darkness. In the midst of the darkness of all the COVID-19 deaths in the world, in the United States, in Florida, and in our own neighborhoods, we see the small flame of hope in a vaccine. We see that small flame in those who are willingly wearing masks. We see that small flame of hope and promise in all the healthcare workers continuing to go to the frontline every day.

Our lessons this morning all speak to the hope and promise we have for that light, even when we are living in darkness. Isaiah is about Jubilee: the Psalm is about the joy of return from exile; Paul reminds those in Thessalonica to "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing;" and our Gospel tells of John the Baptizer who came "to testify to the light."

I know that my remarks are rather long this morning, but I am going to focus on Isaiah, and share with you a story that is very important to my own faith journey. Some of you have heard a version of this story before, but I believe it its worth retelling.

I begin with an explanation of Jubilee ... it is related to Sabbath. The idea of Sabbath comes from the Creation story ... "on the seventh day God rested." So once a week we have a Sabbath. This idea of Sabbath was extended to include every seventh year ... a

time to let the fields go fallow as a means of restoration. It is the basis for a “sabbatical” year for those teaching in colleges and universities.

Then, in the book of Deuteronomy, we also have the concept of Jubilee ... a Sabbath of Sabbath years. After seven Sabbath years (seven times seven is forty-nine) ... after seven Sabbath years ... in the fiftieth year ... there is a Jubilee year. In the reading from Isaiah this morning we hear about Jubilee ... it is a time of forgiving debts, of restoring status, of releasing prisoners, of rescue to the oppressed. In spite of Isaiah’s proclamation, scholars have said that there is no record ... in Holy Scripture or elsewhere ... that a Jubilee year was ever observed. However, I know for a fact that Jubilee can happen.

Here is my story ... and I preface by saying that I feel a degree of embarrassment for sharing it in light of what I see others going through around me today. It seems like comparing a skinned knee to someone with life- threatening injuries from a horrible accident. However, the experience was a formative part of my spiritual journey.

In 1972 I was teaching mathematics in a university when my life took an abrupt turn. A very close friend ... my next door neighbor and faculty colleague ... committed suicide just months after receiving his doctorate ... and just hours after visiting me in my kitchen. David’s death was not only tragic, and it impacted me emotionally and spiritually ... it caused me reconsider the life-path I was following. In that place of a wilderness of uncertainty, I chose to pursue a call to the ordained ministry rather than completing my doctoral studies in mathematics. My wife and I ... and our two young children ... moved to Alexandria, Virginia to attend seminary. The funds from the sale of our house would help to pay for my three years of studies.

However, by the third year of my seminary the money had run out. My wife was working in Washington, DC and I was holding two jobs as well as attending to classes and we were struggling to make ends meet. When we enrolled my youngest son, Christopher, in a pilot preschool program, we qualified as a “low-income” family. With our finances depleted, the season of Advent that year ... those weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas in 1974 ... was a dark time, and I was seriously thinking of postponing my last semester of classes so that my family could get back on its feet. And, as the festival holy day of Jesus’ birth approached I had little hope or promise in my heart and soul ... I was anything but joyful.

Qualifying as a “low-income” family also carried a label, and it put us on certain list ... including the rolls of the Salvation Army’s Toy Give-Away. In October, when the voucher for free toys arrived in the mail, I chuckled to myself and thought that it would make a good keepsake ... memories of my years in seminary. Little did I know that when December rolled around I would be dependent upon that voucher to obtain the only gifts that we were able to put under the Christmas tree ... we were that broke.

It was a surreal experience for me to go to the National Guard Armory for the Salvation Army Toy Give-Away. As I stood in line I realized that those around me were just like me ... embarrassed ... almost ashamed ... to be there. There was no holiday cheer in the waiting area ... no smiles ... no eye contact ... only the hush of humiliation. When it came my turn to enter the gymnasium I found rows of tables marked "Girls" and "Boys" and various ages ... and large signs saying "Only One Toy Per Child." Well-intentioned volunteers on the other side of the tables seemed to act more like police than Santa's elves. Those of us receiving toys were encouraged to move quickly, and as I headed to the exit someone handed me two bags of groceries ... and then I was out in the cold.

I stood in the parking lot trying to comprehend the experience ... with tears rolled down my cheeks. I wanted to take it all back inside and shout that I didn't want their condescending charity, but I knew I had no choice ... I needed the toys if there was going to be any Santa at Christmas ... and I needed the food if we were going to eat.

As you might imagine, that experience gave me a new understanding about what it feels like to stand on the "other" side of the table ... the "other" side of the table at Dining With Dignity ... the "other" side of the table at the Ecumenical Food Pantry ... the "other" side of the table when someone comes to my office asking for help with their rent, or medical bill, or utility payment.

It was in that dispirited state that I went, on the Third Sunday of Advent, to my seminary fieldwork parish ... St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. I was assigned to read the portion of Isaiah that we heard this morning. As I mentioned, Isaiah is proclaiming the spirit of a Jubilee Year. It is a time of forgiving debts, of restoring status, of releasing prisoners, of rescue to the oppressed. Listen again to the words of Isaiah:

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 ...; 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.

As I read those words I heard them as I had never heard them before. At that moment I honestly felt oppressed, and brokenhearted, and a captive to the system ... it was as if I was lying in the midst of ashes. Yet, I also heard a promise that was no longer mere words. I knew that my yearning for "everlasting joy" was a gift that would come. I longed for "garlands instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit." And ... somehow in my spirit ... I knew that those promises and that hope was a reality that could break through my fears.

I would like to be able to tell you that Christmas that year was full of abundance; that some secret Santa filled all our stockings ... and my bank account ... and the spirit of the holiday overcame my depression. In fact, Christmas that year was cold, rainy, and dark, the gifts were sparse, and Christmas dinner was ... well, just another dinner. There were moments of joy and laughter as the boys found what Santa had left them ... and tears at our feelings of inadequacy.

However difficult the Christmas of 1974 is in my memory, it has also fed my spirit in the ensuing years. Relatively speaking, what my family experienced was extremely minimal compared to what many are feeling today ... in this year of 2020 ... the grief, the fear, the real poverty, and oppression, and captivity, and imprisonment that people in the world know on a daily basis. All one has to do is to look around us today to see those who are sick, and grieving, and unemployed, and homeless, and hungry, and held captive by racism, and imprisoned in abusive relationships. Compared to the security that I had taken for granted, the relative discomfort and inconvenience of the winter of 1974 seems embarrassingly mild.

The reason we read from Isaiah on this Third Sunday of Advent, less than two weeks away from Christmas, is its hope for the light to come ... for its promise of Jubilee. Not as an abstract notion of celebrating the fiftieth year ... a Sabbath of Sabbaths ... but as a reality incarnate in the world of our own lives

The promise of Jubilee in Isaiah is not an event that happens every fifty years. Rather it is the reality of the Incarnation ... Jubilee alive in Jesus. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God ... a world as it would be if the Jubilee year were celebrated all the time. A world where things would be turned upside down. There would be no more oppression ... from outside powers or inside forces. There would be no more poverty ... no more material poverty and no more spiritual poverty. There would be no more captivity ... no more prisons with walls in the world out there, and no more prisons without wall in our own psyche ... no more grief, or fear, or hunger.

On that Third Sunday of Advent in 1974 ... when I was a student at Virginia Seminary ... I heard the words of Isaiah as I had never heard them before. I recognized my own poverty, brokenhearted-ness, captivity, and that which oppressed me. I also saw with new eyes the oppression of social and economic forces in the greater world. I understood how people of color were held captive by systemic racism that wouldn't change. And I knew that poverty was much more than just doing without material wealth. Yet, when Christmas came in 1974 I felt something coming alive in me that has driven me ever since.

If we are to be God's Incarnation the way that Jesus is God Incarnate, then we have to both know those states of poverty, and captivity, and oppression, and fear, and grief in our own lives ... and then go beyond them to Jubilee. When we celebrate Christmas in just a couple of weeks, it is not just the birth of Jesus we celebrate ... we also celebrate

the divine spirit of God coming alive in every act of proclaiming good news to the oppressed ... the divine spirit of God coming alive every time we reach out to another who is brokenhearted ... every time we declare liberty to those held captive by their confinement ... and every time we unlock the doors that hold people in prisons. When we sing our songs of Jubilee we become the Incarnation of God ... just like Jesus ... as we turn the world upside down.

In less than two weeks we will celebrate the birth of Jesus. The holy day is called Christmas. It is also called the Feast of the Incarnation ... God coming alive in the world. You and I make that true every time we bring the divine spirit of God into this world ... that is the real celebration of the Incarnation. Even in those dark places in our own lives we can remember the promise and hope of Advent ... God is coming alive in this world. The promise and hope of Isaiah is that when God comes alive in this world it will turn it upside down. God came alive in Jesus. God can also come alive in each of us ... even in the midst of this COVID-19 pandemic.

Yes, this is a dark time. So dark that even one second of silence is too much to capture the fullness of the reality that surrounds us. Yet, even in total darkness a small flame can light a cavern. John came to testify to that light ... Isaiah tells us what that light will bring ... and in less than two weeks we will celebrate that light coming alive in the world. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, we will celebrate the Feast of the Incarnation as the sacred coming alive in each of us as well so that we might bring Jubilee to the small world around us.

Amen.