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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, December 5, 2021

2nd Sunday of Advent/Year C

First Reading: Malachi 3:1-4

Second Reading: Philippians 1:3-11

Gospel Reading: Luke 3:1-6

Sermon Title: “Hope for Those Who are Weary”

Theme

Forerunners and messengers advance the advent of our God. While John the baptizer’s voice in the wilderness may be the principal focus of the day, Malachi’s prophecy could as easily herald the coming Christ as forerunner of the LORD of hosts. Finally all the baptized are called to participate in the sharing of the gospel. In so doing we prepare the way for the coming of Jesus and assist all people in capturing a vision of the “salvation of God.”

Texts:

First Reading: Malachi 3:1-4

¹See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Second Reading: Philippians 1:3-11

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you

share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Sermon

Weary is the word of the day. I got my Moderna COVID booster on Tuesday, and on Wednesday I was a little less energetic than I usually am, but I would not say that I was *weary*.

My grandson Elliott doesn't know the word, *weary*, but I am sure he is already *weary* of waiting for Christmas even though it's only the second weekend of Advent.

I have some elderly members that I call on who are *weary* of life. They ask, "What is the LORD waiting for? I'm ready!" And sometimes their physical condition is pitiful and I wonder too. I understand and sympathize with their *weariness*.

I think it's safe to say that we are all *weary* of the pandemic. We want it to end so that we can fully return to our lives.

What are you *weary* of? Just shout it out, I'll wait ... till I get *weary* of waiting.

Well, there must be something to this concept of *weariness* – the wreath lighting liturgy was full of it this evening/morning. Let's dig into the readings for today and see what they can teach us about *weariness*.

If the reference to a "messenger" from the First Reading from Malachi sounds familiar, that is because similar language has been used in other places in the Old Testament. In the Gospel Reading, for example, Luke quoted Isaiah foretelling that a messenger would come from the wilderness proclaiming, "Prepare the way of the LORD." Isaiah was written between 742-701 BCE. And the reason for his prophecy was to give the *weary* Israelites some encouragement that the LORD was not unaware of their difficult existence, had not forgotten them, and in fact, was preparing to take action ... 700 years later. That surely produced some *weariness*!

Our Old Testament Reading from Malachi was written between 500-450 BCE. The word of the LORD Malachi was given to deliver to the Israelites was that the LORD was sending a "messenger to prepare the way" before the LORD. Then, there is a great description of this messenger in verses 2-4, and most Bible scholars agree that this is a description of John the Baptizer who would come on to the scene ... some 450 years later. *Weariness*!

John the Baptizer came and prepared the way of the LORD or did his level best to. That is what the Gospel Reading is all about. Though John was certainly an eccentric, it worked for him and Jews and Gentiles alike took heed of his message. John did not live to old age, but in his short lifetime, he came to know and understand that Jesus was the Christ, God's Messiah. No *weariness* for John.

I admit I am getting ahead of the season, it was the adult Jesus who followed John and he changed the world by bringing salvation to everyone. And yet, I guess all that love, grace, and mercy was *wearisome* to the Jewish leadership, so they killed him. The problem with that is that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, part of the divine community, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so their solution to the Jesus problem didn't work out.

The Apostle Paul was the author of the Second Reading from Philippians. Paul, of course, was the tireless evangelist to the Gentiles and started numerous churches around the Mediterranean region including this one in Philippi to whom he wrote the letter to the Philippians. We learn in this letter, that Paul wrote it from prison. Arguably, his best days were behind him, his imprisonment will lead him to his death all for the cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now when you think of prison, don't think about one of our modern prisons. Though far from plush, they do have heat and running water, and prisoners are provided meals. Paul was shackled to the wall unless needed elsewhere and was not cared for by his captors. His human needs like food, warmth, or any other bodily needs were taken care of by his disciples, and that is how this letter got out of prison and to Philippi.

I think we can presume that Paul was *weary* of his dreary state, but I don't sense that in his letter. Prison-time was certainly boring, but he used his time to pray and minister to his churches through letters. In addition to Philippians, he wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon from prison.

I imagine him spending his time meditating on all the members of the various churches and the good work they had done. He wrote,

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

Paul was rotting away in prison, and yet he spent his time thinking about others!

Following that he wrote,

⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Though his situation was awful and likely terminal (history does not record how he died), Paul did not lose faith in Jesus Christ, rather, he encouraged the Philippians by reminding them that God in Christ was working *in* them. *Though he struggled, he trusted that God in Christ was with him in his struggle, and if God in Christ was with him in his struggle then he would endure it for the glory of God.

Were you paying attention? Do I need to repeat that?

The entire passage is great, but I will jump to the conclusion:

⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

If anyone qualified to be *weary*, it would be rotting-away-in-jail-Paul, but no, instead, his words to the Philippians were lovely, and encouraging, and uplifting, and empowering. He remained confident that the day of Christ's return will come and he wanted them to be ready – "pure and blameless" is actually what he said.

What is good advice to the Philippians is good advice to us. How are you doing on that "pure and blameless" thing?

Today's theme is "Hope For Those Who Are Weary." After you heard about all that waiting in misery for nearly a couple of millennia, we really don't have that much to be *weary* of, relatively speaking, do we?

Upstairs in Room 304, the room that I teach Confirmation in, there is a timeline from Genesis to the present day. It helps teach Bible to know where we are in our studies week by week. I tell you this because over the entire timeline there are only a few periods where things were good for God's people. The rest of the time, God's people known as the Hebrews, then the Israelites, then the Jews went through one period of *weariness* after another until Christ came to save them. Then they rejected him and continued in their *weariness* until after the Second World War! We could make the argument that their tense situation as the only Jewish nation in a predominately Muslim region of the world still puts them in a period of *weariness*. But I digress.

To be honest with you, this topic of *weariness* is *wearisome* to me. I realize that my experience is not the experience of everyone, but as I said last week, I've got it pretty good right now. I'm not in a hurry for this life to end. I really cannot relate to the Hebrews, the Israelites, or the Jews, or the Philippians.

Then I had a brief conversation with Kaari, Zion's Communications Administrator, and my understanding of *weariness* changed. She said, "Maybe the weariness that we read about during Advent is like being pregnant. Toward the end of the pregnancy, you just want that baby to come out, but you don't know when. Will it be today or tomorrow? You just don't know. You're weary of waiting but you don't have a choice."

Though I am a man, I think she may be right. Maybe that is what it was like back then and the way we should look at Advent now. We know Jesus promised to return, but we don't know if it will be today or tomorrow? We're weary of waiting, but what choice do we have?

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

As good as many of us have it right now, we know by faith that God in Christ has something unimaginably greater planned for us, and so we should look forward to his return and that encourages us.

I don't want to invalidate the issues that make you and me *weary*. They matter to us. They make us cranky and irritable. Let us remember that God in Christ is with us.

Some of us are facing seemingly insurmountable issues – real-life and death issues. My encouragement for all of us comes from Paul who reminded us to trust that God in Christ is with us in our struggles, and if God in Christ is with us in our struggles, then we can endure them and on the other side of them, give glory to God. As we said again and again in the wreath lighting litany, “The Lord gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.”

Prayer

God our Father, most of us have it so good now that we wonder if we have a right to be *weary*. For most of us, the things that we find *wearisome* are trifling. But we have learned from scripture that everything about our lives matters to you.

When we struggle in this life, remind us that your Christ is with us, that we can endure, and when we do, remind us to give you glory.

Until he comes again, help us with our struggle to be "pure and blameless" so that we are ready whenever he returns. We pray this in his name. Amen