**Weekend of Sunday, December 17, 2023**

**3rd Sunday of Advent/Lectionary X/Year B**

**First Reading: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

**Gospel Reading: John 1:6-8, 19-28**

**Sermon Title: *“Light and Darkness: Embracing Advent Hope”***

**Theme**

*“Rejoice always,” begins the reading from 1 Thessalonians. Isaiah and the psalmist make clear that God is turning our mourning into laughter and shouts of joy. “All God’s children got a robe,” go the words of a spiritual. It is not so much a stately, formal, pressed outfit as it is a set of party clothes, clothes we are happy to wear. We receive that robe in baptism, and in worship we gather for a foretaste of God’s party.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

*Though the people had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, they continued to face hardship and oppression. In the language of the jubilee year described in Leviticus 25, the prophet, moved by the spirit of God, announces deliverance for those who are oppressed and comfort for those who mourn.*

 1The 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;
 2to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,
  and the day of vengeance of our God;
  to comfort all who mourn;
 3to 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.
 They will be called oaks of righteousness,
  the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
 4They shall build up the ancient ruins,
  they shall raise up the former devastations;
 they shall repair the ruined cities,
  the devastations of many generations.

 8For I the Lord love justice,
  I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
 I will faithfully give them their recompense,
  and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
 9Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
  and their offspring among the peoples;
 all who see them shall acknowledge
  that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
 10I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
  my whole being shall exult in my God;
 for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
  he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
 as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
  and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
 11For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
  and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
 so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
  to spring up before all the nations.

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

*Paul concludes his letter to the Thessalonians by encouraging them to live lives of continual joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. The closing blessing is grounded in the hope of Christ’s coming.*

16Rejoice always, 17pray without ceasing, 18give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19Do not quench the Spirit. 20Do not despise the words of prophets, 21but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22abstain from every form of evil.
 23May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

**Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28**

*John’s gospel describes Jesus as the “light of the world.” John the Baptist is presented as a witness to Jesus, one who directs attention away from himself to Christ, the true light.*

6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

 19This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” 21And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” 22Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23He said,
 “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
 ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ ”
as the prophet Isaiah said.
 24Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” 26John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” 28This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

**Sermon**

Advent might be characterized as a journey of anticipation and hope by those who embrace the true intention of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting and preparing our hearts for the coming of the Light into the darkness of the world. Today, we draw inspiration from the Gospel of John (John 1:6-8, 19-28) and the prophetic words of Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11) as we reflect on the theme of "The Light in the Darkness: Embracing Advent Hope."

The voice we hear in the First Reading from Isaiah is the prophet’s and his tone is conciliatory. His message is profound given the history of Israel at that point in their history. Isaiah calls himself “anointed” because he has been given the blessing to bring good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to the captives. This prophetic message is echoed in the ministry of Jesus, as he declared in the synagogue, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

I have a question for you to ponder, that I will come back to. Is the scripture Jesus referred to “fulfilled in your hearing?”

The beauty of Isaiah's words lies in their universality and timelessness. The promise of restoration and renewal is not confined to a particular era but extends to all who are in need. Here, I’m thinking of Israel and Ukraine, two nations that are being torn apart by war, and the world, for whom the politics of these wars is said to be “complicated.” As we meditate on these verses, let us embrace the hope, peace, joy, and love that we pray the Light of Christ brings—a hope, peace, joy, and love that transcends our present circumstances, bringing healing to our world and all its citizens, for we are all the creation of the one God revealed in Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel Reading, we encounter the figure of John the Baptist—a man sent by God as a witness to testify concerning the “light” as John the author of the Gospel wrote. At that time, there was much confusion about who John the Baptist was, just as there was much confusion about who Jesus was.

I have said it before, I think John was created purposefully as an eccentric to fulfill his mission. Everything about him was weird, and that worked for John and God. He attracted a lot of attention, from common peasant Jews to King Herod. In a time before television and the internet, he was the best show in town - and for free! John's humility, dedication, and sense of purpose should serve as an inspiration for us all.

John's mission was clear: to prepare the way for the Messiah, to make straight the path for the Light of the world. As we journey through Advent, we are called to reflect on our role as witnesses to the Light in the darkness of our world. And not just reflect on our role as witnesses, but BE witnesses, BE light in our world.

I want to expand upon that thought for a moment. If you can hear my voice then you are worshiping. But why? I hope that all of us would be able to answer something like, “Because I believe that Jesus Christ, the one whose birth we celebrate is God’s Messiah and the savior of the world. And I further believe that he is coming back, and I want to be ready.”

But this text about John the Baptist ought to inspire us to do more than just tell why we worship. Our testimony ought to model John’s testimony. It ought to have a mission and purpose. I hope that all of us would be able to continue to say, “Jesus Christ is the only source of hope, peace, joy, and love this world has. So if you are lacking those four qualities in your life, then maybe you ought to come to my church, because the name of Jesus is spoken there. We are disciples of Jesus Christ and we bring light into the world where we are.” So my questions to you worshipers are:

* Do you believe that?
* Can you say that?
* Do you say that?

In verses 19-28, we witness the religious authorities questioning John about his identity and mission. When asked, "Who are you?" John responds with the words of the prophet Isaiah, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

What does John mean by his exhortation? Since we take Jesus at his word and look forward to his return, John’s words are timeless. He means that to be properly prepared for God’s Messiah when he comes, or in our case when he returns, we need to remove obstacles that prevent us from recognizing him when we see him.

People have asked me how we will know. My answer is, that for the true believer, prepared, and looking for him, *we will know him* like many of the saints from the New Testament;

* like the disciples who dropped what they were doing to follow him;
* like the hemorrhaging woman who reached out to touch the hem of his garment to be healed,
* and like blind Bartimaeus who though he could not see, recognized him.

John's humility is striking. He acknowledges his role as a mere voice, a herald exhorting his listeners to prepare their hearts for the coming Messiah. As we navigate the busyness of our lives, Advent invites us to reflect on our roles as voices crying out *in the wilderness in which we find ourselves*, pointing others toward the Light that dispels darkness.

Advent is a season of preparation and expectation. It is a time when we look back in gratitude for the incarnation of the Word made flesh, *and* we look forward with anticipation to the promised return of our Lord. In this dual perspective, we find the essence of Advent hope—a hope that bridges the gap between the already and the not yet.

As we prepare our hearts during this season, let us be mindful of the areas in our lives that need the transformative touch of *the Light*. The brokenness around us, both in our personal lives and in the broader world, calls for the healing presence of Christ. Advent invites us to allow the Light to penetrate our hearts, dispelling the darkness of sin, doubt, and despair.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

As I conclude, I want to go back to the question I asked you to consider a few moments ago: Isaiah calls himself “anointed” because he has been given the blessing to bring good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to the captives. Jesus said this scripture ***is*** “fulfilled in your hearing?” He didn’t *suggest*, or ask *if* this scripture was “fulfilled in your hearing.” He said *it was* “fulfilled.”

Therefore, amid the challenges we face individually and collectively, Advent beckons us to embrace the hope *we have* with renewed vigor. The Light of Christ *is* a beacon in the darkness, offering guidance, comfort, and assurance. It *is* a light that never dims, a flame that cannot be extinguished.

Isaiah's imagery of being clothed with the garments of salvation and covered with the robe of righteousness *is* a powerful reminder of the transformative work of Christ, in us!

As we navigate the Advent season, let us do so with hearts filled with hope - a time when we consciously *choose to live* hopefully in the radiance of the Light.

Let us echo the prophetic words of Isaiah, embracing the promise of restoration and renewal that the Light brings. May we, like John the Baptist, *be* witnesses to the Light, pointing others to the transformative power of Christ.

As we wait in anticipation for the celebration of Christ's birth and look forward to his promised return, may our lives *be* testaments to the hope that dwells within us. Let the Light shine through us, dispelling the darkness in our world and illuminating the path for those who are still searching.

**Prayer**

Stir up the wills of your faithful people, Lord God, and open our ears to the words of your prophets, that, anointed by your Spirit, we may testify to your light; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen