

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 21:25-36

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalms 25:1-9

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

November 28, 2021

The First Sunday of Advent

Today is a great day for a baptism. In fact, we have 3 baptisms at Grace this morning and we have one young man who will be taking communion for the very first time. It's fitting as we move into Advent to be reminded of the reason God sent his son into this world and what better way to remember God's gift than through the face of a child? If we could take the grace of this moment and shape the perfect future our children, we would all surely do so.

It's why the parents and sponsors promise at the baptism to be responsible for seeing that the child presented is brought up in the Christian faith and life. It's why as a congregation we promise to do all in our power to support this child in his life in Christ. The foundation we give our children matters or else we would never come together for this beautiful sacrament.

But, why? Why is this foundation important?

We love to hear the stories of Advent and Christmas and we certainly love to watch a baptism. They are all so full of hope and joy in these moments. But, I want you to consider that these events, although joyful in every possible way also point to a need much greater than manger scenes and baptismal gowns.

When we talk about our belief in Christ, when we baptize our children we pray these words... Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon this your servant the forgiveness of sin, and have raised her to the new life of grace. Sustain her, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give her an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. .

Now, this prayer that we say at a baptism names a couple of important points...it recognizes that as Christians, we are going to need forgiveness and grace, because we aren't perfect. We will need an inquiring and discerning heart because we will have to make tough choices. We will need courage to face difficult times because life isn't always easy. And, we will need to know God's love and find joy in God's creation because ultimately, this world is beautiful and good and God's want us to enjoy what we have been given.

There is an acknowledgement in our baptismal liturgy that life is made up of both joy and sorrow, pain and hope. And it also reassures us that God is ever present throughout our lives no matter what we may face...the good and the bad.

And so, I am grateful for our Gospel reading from Luke this morning that provides the same contrast. The contrast of a troubled world with the knowledge of God's deep love for humanity.

I thought...maybe this is truly the perfect start of Advent – right where we are, acknowledging our need, expressing our joy and today, we also get to see that joy in the innocent and hopeful eyes of children.

When we put the fullness of life in perspective, the words from today's Gospel become all the more powerful. My favorite verse is the command to "Stand up and raise your heads! Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life."

One of our familiar Advent scriptures reminds us..."Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." And we read these stories to our children every year. But this year, Luke reminds me that we have to go deeper. Deeper into the reality of our world, deeper into our commitment to build that strong foundation...not just for ourselves but for our children. God sent Jesus not to take away all that may hurt us, but to help us grow and move through the challenges that we will face. We promise our children at their baptism to provide that same foundation. And...Luke reminds us of why we make that promise in the first place.

Will Willimon, an incredible teacher and preacher of the Gospel states, "The difference between good and bad news is where you are standing when you get the news." Willimon is naming an essential truth of Luke's Gospel....the truth of a disruptive world, of bad choices, or unforeseen circumstances, of souls who need someone to believe in.

"The difference between good and bad news is where you are standing when you get the news."

So, let me ask the adults...Where are you standing this Advent? I mean, don't just give the answer you think you should say. (Because that's obvious). Give the answer that reflects where you are today...in your faith, and in your commitment to Christ. Is it where you want to be standing? And, for the parents and grandparents...Where do you want your children to stand?

Because when we are standing with God, we can face insurmountable obstacles, especially when we get weighed down with the worries of this life. That's what Luke is teaching us.

I know this to be true deep in my soul and I want you to know it, too. I hope some of you know exactly what that feels like...to be faced with the challenges of this life, and to be able to turn to God and put your trust right in his hands. And in that moment you start to feel peace welling up within you, an assurance that God is holding you when you thought you couldn't keep going. It's when you know and feel that Jesus is in your life.

When I see our kids hurt, when I see them afraid or bullied, when I see them insecure or lonely, I want to set them right at God's feet, right on that solid ground that will provide hope and encouragement when the world feels cruel and unbearable. I want them to know what it feels like to trust that nothing in this world can ever be more powerful than God's love for them.

And, if you haven't felt that sense of love and hope (no matter how old you are), I want to encourage you to give God a try. Stand on His solid ground, even if you are a little scared to take that first step. It's even fair to say, "God, I am not sure how or why you sent your son into this world. And I'm not sure if it will make a difference. God, do you really want to help someone like me?" It's OK to be honest with God. Because, you know what? That's why God sent Jesus...for someone just like you and just like me. To love us when we are afraid or when we doubt or when we are lonely and don't know where to turn. God sent Jesus just for you.

There is something profoundly God-given about the way my Baptist upbringing talked about this very thing. Although we don't have an altar call in the Episcopal Church, I am still deeply aware of the power of that moment...when we were encouraged to give our lives to Christ, to accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. That moment is a moment of choosing where to stand, of actively saying...right here, right now, I am going to trust you Lord. I am going to trust in your strength, in your love, and in your redemption. I am going to choose to stand with you and my life will be a testament to God's good news of great joy.

That good news means something. It means something so powerful and life changing for us and for our children. And this Advent, let us all remember that Jesus was sent for each and every one of us so that we can always stand assured that we are never, ever alone. That is solid ground. Amen.

For additional reflection

When I was a young person in the church, I had a red bible. I got this bible in the 3rd grade after memorizing bible verses like the 10 commandments and the Beatitudes. I loved this red bible and I still do. It became for me a compass to my solid ground. And I was reminded of that when I read our Psalm for today...

Psalm 25:1-9

¹To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you;
let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over
me.

²Let none who look to you be put to shame; let the treacherous be
disappointed in their schemes.

³Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.

⁴Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my
salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.

“To you, I lift my soul, O God, in you I trust.” The Hebrew word for soul is *nephesh* which is better translated as the *whole self*, not just the soul. In other words, when this world hurts, when I don’t know where to turn, I will lift my whole self up to you, God, and in you, I will place my trust. For you are the God of my salvation.

For our children, this might translate into something like...

Lord, take care of me.

When people hurt my feelings, help me to feel better.

When I hurt other people’s feeling, forgiveness me and help me say I’m sorry.

When I don’t feel good about myself, remind me that you love me.

When I am afraid, remind me that you are with me.

What else might we add?

I encourage you to build your own Psalm with your family or friends. What do you need to hear this holiday? What would help you stand on solid ground?