

Advent 2 Reflection
December 10, 2023

Isaiah 40: 1-11 Psalm 85: 2 Peter 3: 8-15 St. Mark 1: 1-8

Last week, at the beginning of Advent, we looked at the idea of God penetrating the darkness of our world with his divine “AHA” and our personal and corporate journey with the words, “Let there be light.” In and through Jesus, we know that God is present through all time and all space and, to quote that intrepid explorer of the galaxy, Buzz Lightyear, “to infinity and beyond.” All that God requires of us to inherit the kingdom is that we always have our candles ready to be lit, so that when we will hear Jesus say to us, “Come, you beloved of my Father, take up your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world”, we set out immediately on the road with our Good Shepherd and the Light of the World.

Isaiah this morning begins by hearing God set forth one of the conditions for kingdom-living – to be comforters, to be men and women who unashamedly enter the darkness of other people’s lives and shine for them even the tiniest ray of hope. In the eyes of God and in the hearts of the comforters called and sent by him, there will no longer be high mountains and deepest valleys – all the earth and those who dwell therein will be one people, a holy nation, God’s own children. Human distinctions of race, colour, creed, orientation and status will not be worth a fig as we recognize ourselves in the faces of those to whom we offer light. And in the giving, we receive. Isaiah ends the reading this morning with a sweet image: the One who “tends his flock like a shepherd: who gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those who have young.” As sweet and beautiful as this description is, we need to remember that often the shepherd was placed in great danger personally in order to fulfill his role as comforter and guardian of the sheep and goats; thus we need to be aware that when we answer the call to comforting servanthood, we may be placed in situations and times when we will be put to the test and that we may not always sense the divine presence. Even if we do not succeed in our ministry of comfort, we know that God will be with us and is willing to walk with us beside roaring rivers and still waters.

In Psalm 85, this theme of our obligation and duty as “light – bearers for the Lord” finds a deep defining. The author begins with acknowledging the compassion of his Lord, a God who “forgave the iniquity of his people...set aside all wrath and turned from (his) fierce anger”. The author reminds God that his primary virtue is that of forgiveness and calls upon him to “show us your unfailing love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.” IF God does what God does best, indicates David, then the paramount elements of the kingdom will rise and envelop the world: love and faithfulness, righteousness and peace. The people are invited to enter the fullness of a relationship with the One who offers to revive us again so that we may rejoice as his sons and daughters, God’s children of the light. Centuries later, on the side of a hill in the Galilee, Jesus was say to those who came to him seeking hope and love, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on a stand where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and praise your Father in heaven.”

Peter is responding to the community of believers in Rome who in all likelihood did not know Jesus when He walked upon this good earth and find themselves in the midst of intense persecution by the rulers of the empire. As they cry out like their ancestors did in the land of Babylon, “O God, where are you?”, Peter calls them to live “holy and godly lives...looking for a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.” Peter asks his people to have faith, faith in the One who gives light in the darkness, hope in the despair, love

in the heart of the hate which surrounds them. It is not an easy call to answer, but no one ever said that Kingdom – living, Kingdom – giving would be a walk in the park.

Mark's gospel begins with the emergence of a man whom many would have labelled as a "wild and crazy guy". The cousin of Jesus, John recognized his call from God to be the "voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord'". Baptizing those who came to him and his followers on the shore of the river Jordan, he acknowledged that the baptism he celebrated was symbolic more than anything else: the washing away in the waters of the Jordan of those moments when the individual before him had fallen short of the desires of the Creating One. John knew his star was fading, that his light was dimming because the One to come was coming. When Jesus approached and entered the water, the skies erupted, clouds split and a voice was heard declaring, "You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Both Mark and Luke write that the Voice was an interior one, a moment of utter intimacy between a father and a son whereas Matthew makes the declaration a public statement of the identity of Jesus. Why the difference remains a bit of a mystery but I think I prefer the interior dialogue myself because it means that, if Jesus really meant it when he said, "I no longer call you a servant...I now call you friend", then I am able to nestle into the arms of my "lover Lord" and find in him my resting-place.

With this blessed assurance, I am able to "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" knowing that, in spite of the darkness and the things that go bump in the night in my life, God will be with me as my shepherd who will comfort me all the days of my life and to infinity and beyond.

SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT THIS COMING WEEK.

1. The readings for this week speak of being comforters and light-bearers. In your journey, have there been moments when comfort and light have been given to you? How did you react to the gifts offered and what did you do with them?
2. Do I see myself as one who lets his or her light shine before others? If yes, how do I do that; if no, what do you think inhibits you from shining your light before others.
3. As "light-bearers" we need to be aware that in our "zeal for the Lord" we may blind others – how can we offer hope and comfort to another person without offering judgment etc... as a part of the package?
4. How would you define Peter's call that we live "holy and godly lives"? How might you do a little better at that?
5. Jesus told his folk to "rise early in the morning and leave the house and find a quiet and lonely place" where you and God can share intimacy. Why does this seem both comforting and scary at the same time?
6. Does your church experience speak to you of comfort, hope, light and peace or of something else. What can your faith community do to embrace more deeply the call to "comfort, comfort my people" ?