

Year B, Advent 2
December 6, 2020
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

Like last week, we are going start the sermon by praying the Angelus together. It is in the sermon text, and I attached a nicer looking copy suitable for framing or actually using. I really do encourage you to say it outside of church; as you go to bed, before breakfast, sometime. Those little moments to bring God’s name and spirit to the fore of your mind and soul do help.

V. The angel of the Lord announced unto Mary.

R. And she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

R. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

V. Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

R. Be it unto me according to your Word.

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

R. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

V. And the Word was made flesh.

R. And dwelt among us.

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

R. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

V. Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

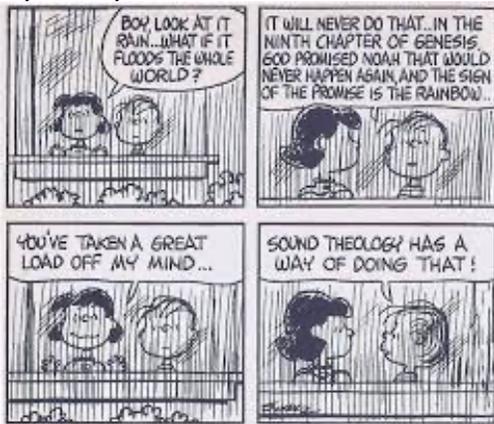
V. Let us pray: Pour your grace into our hearts, O Lord, that we who have known the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ, announced by an angel to the Virgin Mary, may by his cross and passion be brought to the glory of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN

Hopeful anticipation. That is today’s theme, the hope of Israel. Now last week, I laid out a theological trajectory of Advent. We begin in the darkness of anguish and despair. As we process the raw meaning of the world we feel sorrow. In the light of Jesus, that sorrow can be transformed, and we can change the direction of our lives, change the orientation of our minds and souls... we can repent. And in repenting, we’re not fixed, we’re not resting in the ever loving arms of God, not yet,

but we will. We have the blessed assurance of God in Christ, and generation to generation in the church that we will be brought to the glory of His resurrection, and that, is hope happening.

One of the commentators I consult reminded me of an old Peanuts cartoon. Charles Shultz was theologically very astute. One of my favorite moments with the Gospels each year is watching “A Charlie Brown Christmas” with Linus’ masterful recitation of Luke’s nativity in all the glory of the King James Version. I urge you to watch it this Advent.

The cartoon... I’ll put it up on the screen and I’ll describe it if you can’t see it. It shows Lucy and her little brother Linus looking out at the rain. (Fitting for today). Lucy looks distraught and says, “Boy, look at it rain... What if it floods the whole world?” The ever solid Linus replies,



correctly, “It will never do that again... In the 9th chapter of Genesis God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.” She smiles with relief, “You’ve taken a great load off of my mind...” To which Linus replies, again, sagely, “Sound theology has a way of doing that.”

That Advent trajectory I laid out last week, is sound theology. But it doesn’t really start to take a load off of our minds until we get to the hope! Don’t get me wrong, I like to repent as much as the next sinner, but I can’t say I usually feel so great in the days or decades leading up to the time of actual change! So the Lectionary throws us a bone and we jump ahead to hope, about anticipating the hope that we are promised. And where the rainbow was the symbol of God’s promise to Noah, the words of a prophet, taken up and echoed by another prophet, that voice of one crying out, in there is our hope.

“Comfort, O comfort my people... speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her...” Those words! “A voice cries out, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.’” These comforting words come from what is known as Second or Deutero-Isaiah. First Isaiah, chapters 1 – 39, was written early in the exile. Things were pretty bleak. Third Isaiah, 55-66, was written once they were back in Israel. They were overjoyed about being home, but, like we read last week, not all was well back home. Second Isaiah is written in the midst of the exile, but things were percolating. There were glimmers of hope. Cyrus, the Persian conqueror was defeating their Babylonian captors. Was he a savior? *The* savior? It was still dark, they were far from home, and yet... maybe, just maybe the

tide was turning. Maybe, just maybe we should prepare the way. “Comfort, O comfort my people...”

Fast forward 500 or so years, and leap from Babylon to the banks of the Jordan River, another prophetic voice cries out in the wilderness, in the darkness. John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness. We’ll get more into the nature of John next week, but what is important, important for our anticipation of hope today is John’s time and place.

Isaiah was in exile in Babylon. John lived in Roman occupied Palestine. A metaphor Lindsey Graham used in the 2016 primaries is appropriate here: the difference between life under Babylon or Rome is like the difference between being shot or being poisoned. It was grim either way. Nevertheless, Isaiah perceived hope on the horizon and bids us prepare, and John does the same. John, even in the wilderness of oppression and degradation, sensed the light just beyond his horizon. He quotes this very passage in Isaiah! (He quotes it wrong. Isaiah writes “a voice cries out, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way.’” John speaks of the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness...” Is the voice in the wilderness or are we supposed to prepare a way in the wilderness?) In any case, even if John’s Biblical scholarship was a bit dodgy, his theology is sound, and that takes a load off. As dark, as wild as it was, he knew that help was on the way, and he knew his role in that help coming. He was forerunner, herald, proclaiming that “...one more powerful than I is coming after me...” That does take a load off.

It is pretty dark right now. Not just because its December 6th and we’re in the middle of a Nor’easter. The COVID news is bad, right here it is bad. Our own Rev. Persis Williams is in the middle of the outbreak at the Island nursing home. She loves cards. Schools and business have been closed. Our positivity rate has tripled in a month, and... help is on the way. It is before nautical twilight, no light has teased the horizon yet, but we have it on good authority that we have reason to hope.

Have you ever stood a night watch? Maybe at sea, or at a Manudy Thursday all night vigil, or in the military? When I was out in the field with my Marine platoon, I always put myself as the last watch, usually the two hours before beginning of nautical twilight. Three in the morning, particularly if you slept two hours in the previous 24, is a bitter pill to swallow. And on watch, you had to be very still, very quiet. It is hard to stay awake, like bang your face into a machine gun hard. And it was always cold at 3 AM in the Mohave desert, always. The slowest time has ever moved in my life began at 3 AM more times than I care to remember. The despair! I remember being on the verge of tears, trying to stay awake. Trying *not* to think about how groggy I would be until I get to

lay down at midnight or one the next night. And it was peacetime – we didn't have the sense of urgency that warzones demand.

But then... suddenly, there would only be 45 minutes left. You can do anything for 45 minutes. (At least a 24 and in tip-top shape you can). As reveille neared, as the dawn approached, couldn't see it yet, and it was still freezing and I was still tired, and it was still going to be another impossibly long day bouncing around the desert in a tank or HUMVEE, either freezing in the bone dry winter wind or sweltering in 125 degree desert heat, even with all of that, I so vividly remember when it would switch inside, switch from despair to hope. I loved that feeling of knowing, really knowing that I can do it. I can make it 25 more minutes. Then I look at my watch again, I can make 24 more minutes of this... That was the experience of hope. Hope happens.

That hope is happening now, right now in our world, or like in the times of Isaiah and John, it is about to. It has been dark for a long time; we are in a wilderness: COVID, the economy, our politics. And we are being assured that it will get worse, maybe a whole lot worse in the next couple of months, and you know what, Christmas is near. 19 days and a wakeup. That helps. Christmas coming always helps. God bless us, everyone! Right? And in just 6 days later, it will no longer be 2020! That's one calendar I won't recycle into cards. Writing 2021 on anything will help, on some level it will help. The vaccines are in the mail. Not enough. And the unforeseen hitches in manufacturing and distribution and the side effects and anti-vaxxers and all the other problems aside, it is coming. Halleluiah! And our politics are changing. While many appreciate President Trump's policies, almost half of this country, his manner, by his own design and admission, has been divisive. He has intentionally driven Americans apart. Change is just at the horizon. It is not here yet. Our President is still making utterly false claims about the elections, attempting to diminish our confidence in our electoral process, which is a wicked thing to do. But change is coming. You might not appreciate President-elect Biden's platform, fair enough, but we should all welcome the coming break from the acrimony of the past four years.

Hope is on the way, it hasn't fully materialized, but have faith. Like the watchman waits for the morning, anticipate the hope on the way. We still have a treacherous journey before us through the wilderness. The way is not straight, yet, the valleys are still deep, the mountains are still steep, there is rough going still ahead. We are like Isaiah's meadow; we wither and we fade as forces more powerful than we could ask or imagine toss us too and fro. But that same force, the *ruah*, the breath of God that stirred the deep in the very beginning, that is the word of our God, is Jesus Christ, and will stand forever. And with Him, we will rise in glory, too. Anticipate the hope!

We'll end with words of St. Anselm of Canterbury that speak to us now as much as they must have when they were written a thousand years ago. It is called "A Song of Christ's Goodness."

Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you; *
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.
Often you weep over our sins and our pride, *
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgment.
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds, *
in sickness you nurse us and with pure milk you feed us.
Jesus, by your dying, we are born to new life; *
by your anguish and labor we come forth in joy.
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness; *
through your gentleness, we find comfort in fear.
Your warmth gives life to the dead, *
your touch makes sinners righteous.
Lord Jesus, in your mercy, heal us; *
in your love and tenderness, remake us.
In your compassion, bring grace and forgiveness, *
for the beauty of heaven, may your love prepare us.
AMEN.

Now that is some sound theology. I hope it helps. AMEN