

Year C, Advent 2
December 5, 2021
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“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; *
he has come to his people and set them free.”

That’s us. God’s people, set free. How free are you feeling?

A blessed Second Sunday of Advent to you. Sin and repentance... that is the theme that this day lays at our feet. Of course there is hope and faith and joy (love too), those things are held up high in the Advent season. Sure those things are often obscured by the messiness of life, by how fleeting life can be, but if we skip over our true human nature, our own brokenness and sinfulness, the hope, faith and joy (love, too) that we experience will be cheap. Cheap grace as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it. Cut-rate. Hollow. Dead. Cheap. And cheap grace will not do. Not if we take all of this seriously.

And we need to take this stuff seriously. We have always had to, our world has always been complicated. Justice denied anywhere is justice denied everywhere, right?. For years I have said that the sky is falling. And it certainly is. And it has always been falling. That is to say that have we always needed a greater sense of urgency about addressing the sins of the world and ourselves, but a sense of urgency on an eschatological time line. But I don’t know, the past two years are speeding up the time table. There are sweeping changes looming

in the courts, the investigation into the Epiphany insurgency at the capitol is revealing some damning connections at the highest levels of Government, there have been racist statements and intimations of violence between members of Congress???. Those aren't partisan political statements, those are moral observations about our common life in this nation. This is America not some banana republic. Or perhaps we must re-think what America is or is becoming? And right along-side the climate is teetering and very, very few of us have the will or the power to do anything substantial about it and most who do, aren't. (Think Glasgow). Our own Gulf of Maine is warming faster than 99% of all bodies of water in the world. The result is that our social cohesion is more and more tenuous. The fabric of society is frayed in many places. Far too many of us aren't willing to make any sacrifices to help our neighbor. From those who can best afford it not wanting to share through more taxes to all sorts of folks refusing to be vaccinated. With the COVID pandemic, political/racial firestorm and looming climate disaster, we are in an all hands on deck moment for humanity. Happy Advent!

I have, maybe not happy news, but good news to share with you. Very good news. That news? The Gospel of Jesus Christ! God has come to us "to set us free... free from the hands of our enemies, Free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life." That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? To be set free, saved. Free to worship... that doesn't mean free to go to church, free to use

incense, but free to Worship... We worship God most poignantly when we are a righteous force in the world, when we serve our neighbor, sacrifice ourselves for our friends. “What you do to the least of these you do to me,” sayeth the Lord. True worship certainly can happen here, around this table, in this place: that is what we are aiming for. But for this, or any worship to be true to the legacy of Jesus Christ, our worship must lead to works and love and righteousness in our whole lives. You and God, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, are like this< 🙌 >. Worship in all its forms makes that real.

So why is it all such a mess? Not just the world, but our own lives? Why, as St. Paul asks, do we so often do so many things that we know we should not do and fail to do the things we know we should? From *not* having a second almond croissant, to being dismissive to your politically opposite brother-in-law (or daughter or neighbor), to consuming above your fair-share, not taking the climate seriously, travelling prodigally, avoiding civic responsibility... why do we do and fail to do so much?

Sin.

I know, I know, no one wants to talk about sin (let alone sin and death) in Advent, what with visions of sugar plums and Cyber Monday deals dancing in our heads, but if Jesus is the reason for the Christmas season, sin, and as St. John the Forerunner came to proclaim, repentance of sin, is the reason for *this* season, Advent.

A note on sin. What is it? ____ OK, Anglican 101 quiz time... if you wanted to ponder the definition of sin, where might you look? ____ The Catechism! Yes! And where is the Catechism, or Outline of the Faith as we politely call it? ____ In the Book of Common Prayer. What page? Ok, I didn't know that one myself. (It is at the back, right before the small print). It is actually worth reading. In it, sin is defined (page 848 if you were wondering) as "...the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation." That's the party line, not definitive, not dogma (meaning it isn't required that you agree), but a great starting point, and it is pretty good. If you just do what you want to do, and not what you know you *should* do, you are on a slippery slope that leads too often to straight to perdition.

I think of sin as all the things we do because we are alienated from God, because we feel distanced from God's loving embrace. And, by doing those sinful things, we further feel distanced from God. The worse we feel, the worse we behave and the worse we behave the worse we feel. The further from God you feel the worse you behave which makes you feel even further from God and so on and so on and so on. It is a nasty feedback loop.

We all know that feeling, right? And not in relation to God. You feel lousy, angry, ornery whatever your default flavor of suffering is. All you really need is an encouraging word, ("It'll be ok, little bunny"), or maybe a hug, or a cookie, that is what you *need*, but all you do is

splash your mood over everyone within reach, ensuring only that you will remain alone in your mess. Well, our sinfulness in relation to God often plays out about the same, doesn't it? It does for me.

So I can hear everyone asking "Ok, so where is the good news in any of this?" Well, the good news is this: God loves us so much, loves *you* too much, to let us stay as we are.

"He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every 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;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

This is such a big deal, is so important to God and is such heavy lift that not only does it require the Son of God in God's self to sacrifice Himself, but it requires a top-shelf prophet to prepare the way. And what was the message of that prophet? "...repent and believe in the good news."

The Good News is that we are save-able from ourselves and from sin and eternal death, (well, not *saveable*, we are in fact saved), and our salvation is offered in repentance, the ability to repent, the chance, the second chance (and third and fourth and seventy times seventieth chance) to repent, to change the direction of our lives, to do it differently this time

around, more in line with... how do we define sin???) Not the seeking of our own will but rather “seeking the will of God...”

This is not about being naughty and stopping being naughty for naughtiness’ sake. It is about how the bad things we do detrimentally affects those with whom we share existence: human, all beings, sentient and otherwise, all super-beings – ecosystems and such, our neighbors in every possible sense of the word. I, with God, am deeply concerned with the state of your individual soul... but God (and I) are at least as concerned about how you integrate (or don’t) in to the vast interdependent web of all existence, our ontological neighborhood.

“Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.” That is one of the ways the prophet Baruch speaks of repentance, of changing the direction of our actions and intentions. Death happens, yes. But it is not the end of the story. We must grieve our losses, feel fully the ripping pain of loss, sit in our ash heap in our rent garment, but not languish in despair, hold on to our feelings for the feelings sake. “Even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.” That is repentance.

“Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting...” You are not strong enough to solve the problems of the world. Heck, most of us aren’t strong enough to push through moderate depression on our own. And for all of history most of us have been content to stay with that, to accept suffering as inevitable, to accept our lot as a conquered, oppressed

people, a lost cause, powerless and living a meaningless life. But that is not true! That is Sin speaking (and Sin can whisper in our ear at a 11 on the volume dial).

“Putting on the robe of righteousness,” or putting on “the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting” is taking on the mantle of God, in faith, taking on God’s mission, God’s will as your will, even if you *know* you can’t do it on your own, especially if you know you can’t do it on your own, you can take on the principalities and powers of the world, you can take on the demons that have dogged you your whole life. You can change direction. You can make it right. You can repent and help God make the high places low, the low places high and the crooked places straight.

How? Well that would take a sermon part 2 and next week we have to talk about Joy (it is Gaudete Sunday, the pink candle and as joyful as being repentant can be that is not the theme of next week). But there are a few things to chew on, things to think on to get the melody of repentance stirring.

There is the Rite of Reconciliation, Confession. That is a formal, sacramental way to kick-start a process of repentance. It is not just a ontological clean slate that results from Confession, it is formulating a plan to, as the Rite ends, to “Go and sin no more.” Not for everyone, but it is an important tool we have. Give me a call if you want to learn more.

You can meditate on the fact that you have no control over anyone else. That’s no fun. Meditate on the fact that you are responsible for yourself. Not only how you behave, but how you react to the world. A lot

of people are very, very angry right now. And anger can lead us to believe that the world would be better “if only those people would...” Maybe that is true, but you have no say of that. You do have a say over how YOU react. You can alter how much violence is in your heart, or disdain, or derision or condescension. You alone can turn the other cheek, pray for those who persecute you, or drive you absolutely batty or simply inconvenience you. That might not directly get anyone vaccinated, but being furious and dismissive of the other is guaranteed to alienate skeptics, and more alienation is the last thing we need right now.

And on this shortened list means of repentance, you can pray. Prayer can be active conversation with God. “Dear Lord, help... thanks... wow...” or some combination thereof, as Anne Lamont puts it. That can center us and our intentions. But as St. Francis said, “Pray always, use words if needed.” The universe of contemplative is silent waiting for the Word of God. Ignatian prayer is visualization and discerning God in life. And action. Windy the girls and I, and others here at church prayed with a bunch of other people while holding signs at a now weekly vigil about the climate on the bridge downtown yesterday. Prayer of the first order. The work that Judy and Prudy did in organizing the Thanksgiving meals, the gathering that so many did: prayer. Sending a note to Libbie Cluett or Fred Marston, dear members who are ill right now: prayer, or to Helen Weinland’s family. When you write a check to the church, or to the discretionary fund, or to HOME, the Human Rights Campaign, NAACP or 350.org: prayer. Or even to a political figure or campaign or cause if you

see that cause as being in alignment with the will of God (a pretty high bar): prayer.

Right now, on the 2nd Sunday of Advent in a troubled time in our world, repentance of sin, our sin and the world's, that is the call of the day. We have things we can do, and with God on our side, we might actually be able to do it. And in that is true freedom, free to live without fear, all the days of our lives.

We'll end today with a word of encouragement from our sponsor:

“In the tender compassion of our God *

the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, *

and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” AMEN