

Sermon Manuscript – November 27, 2016 @ Our Saviour – Croton-on-Hudson

Lord, may the words of my mouth, and the meditation upon all of our hearts be acceptable and pleasing to you, my God, my Rock and my Redeemer, AMEN!

Some of you may be fans of Anne Lamott, a contemporary essayist, humorist and insightful writer who reflects eloquently on various subjects including motherhood, addiction and mental disease, and existential reality. She is also a well-known thinker on matters of faith. In her 2005 book entitled “Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith”, she wondered about the darkness that seems to pervade real life and remembered as helpful, a quote from a collection of devotions written by another well-respected author, Barbara Johnson - “We are an Easter people, living in a Good Friday world”. Both Johnson and Lamott, through juxtaposing images of the defeat at the Cross, with the victory through the Resurrection, offer us insight into our daily existence as people of faith, often angry and disillusioned at world events while at the same time yearning for and living in the hope that in the end God will have the final say. In Lamott’s case she finds the quote inspiring because it reflects a reality she sees in a world that is too often frustrating and depressing, but can be balanced with the hope that someday she will see an empty tomb, and not a crucifixion as the defining image of the world around her.

“I don’t have the right personality for Good Friday:”, Lamott writes of her impatience with a world that seemingly operates in opposition to the will of God, and goes on “I’d like to skip ahead to the Resurrection. In fact, I’d like to skip ahead to the Resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb: everlasting life and a box full of chocolates. Now you’re talking.”

Barbara Johnson sees less duality in her original reflection which contains the quote, finding no separation between God and the world that Lamott seems to keep separate. “I

believe the world is shaped by the hand of a loving God” writes Johnson, testifying to God’s presence in the midst of the struggles of the world. Seeing the divine even in our sadness, she writes: “Remember, your tears are precious to God. They are like stained glass windows in the darkness whose true beauty is revealed only when there is a light within.”

Each of these women have given voice to feelings that we all have from time to time, the yearning for God’s presence among us and now may feel even more intensely entering a new church year, and another season of Advent. As a nation, we are divided over the aftermath of our Presidential elections. Some see a Trump victory as a defining moment in our struggle, one that sets America on a new course for greatness, perhaps inaugurating a resurrection of sorts. Others see the new administration as dangerous, regressive, intolerant, with great fear that progress made to correct past injustices will be rolled back, and the powerful, will get their way once again.. And still others find the potential somewhere in between, having both hope and concerns about new leadership, and watching, preparing and standing ready to be witnesses for God in the midst of what will come.

As I thought through my own feelings about this, as well as those of Lamott and Johnson, I realized that the quote “We are Easter people living in a Good Friday world” was not so satisfying to me as when I first read it. And while reading the assigned texts for today, it dawned on me. We are indeed Easter people, always guided by the hope of the Resurrection, but couldn’t we see our current reality more in terms of Advent, than Good Friday, more anticipating than despairing, more willing to watch for God in our realities, than to look beyond them, more preparing to serve the living God than to hold a vigil for his sudden appearance? Instead of a people grieving a forsaken world, I see a world that is most definitely struggling, but in this struggle, Easter people are called to watch, to prepare and to live in hope. As people

of faith living in difficult times, I think we are more appropriately described as “Easter people living in an Advent world”.

During Advent we look to the great prophets of the Hebrew scriptures to speak to us with these voices of hope in the midst of tragedy – to testify that we are indeed an Easter people living in an Advent world. The first words of hope we hear this Advent come from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah lived during difficult times, and for the people Isaiah witnessed to, these were far worse times than we face today. Their world had become darkened, living in exile away from their homeland under rule by a conquering nation, away from Jerusalem, the place where they understood God to dwell with them, far away from a time when they were a great nation under Kings David and Solomon. Instead of seeing their world as a place where God ruled, the people of Israel and Judah now saw a different world, one of despair, destruction and death. A world whose future was uncertain and whose possibilities were limited.

What the people needed then, and what we need now is to see a future beyond the limitations we have placed on the world around us, with God on the outside lurking and ready to come in and sort things out. If we see ourselves as living in a Good Friday world, we may occupy our minds and hearts with the violence, injustice and see ourselves as defeated. We may indeed long for God to come and fix it all, but what does that leave for us while we wait for that unknown day or hour? This is why Advent is so important, because it is a time where we anticipate the coming of God right in the midst of our dirty lives. We yearn to see God With Us.

Much of our religious life is focused on hearing words. We hear our faith stories read to us each time we worship. We hear the words of forgiveness pronounced to us during confession. We hear our voices raised as one when we sing praises through our hymns, and some of you may even be hearing my words now. But Isaiah’s prophecy starts out with something different – this prophecy wasn’t something Isaiah heard, but it was something he

saw – he saw God’s word – and what he saw was a God that was already at work renewing God’s people, that the people’s circumstantial reality was not all there was despite the fact it was all they could see at the time. Isaiah stands in the darkness and calls the people to see light through the cracks, to see the Word of God as he sees it, and to walk in that light.

Isaiah sees a world of promise, in sharp contrast to the realities around them. He sees a future where the great city of Jerusalem, the city prayed for and longed for in today’s Psalm, the place where God’s word dwells, will be lifted high to a point where all will see it and be drawn to God’s word. The result of this will be a world where violence, hate and division will give way to peace, love and unity. Where the instruments of death and destruction will be transformed into tools of nurturing and building community. This is a compelling vision of hope and promise because like us, the people are yearning for a sign from God that the world is not limited only to what they see around them. We long for God to reveal God’s self in the midst of the trouble surrounding us. We ask ourselves when – when will we see God? When will we see God’s promises in action? When will this reign of God be here? If yesterday was Good Friday, shouldn’t tomorrow be Easter?

But we are an Easter people living in an Advent world. We don’t know when all of God’s promises will be fulfilled, but we know they are in process. We know they are in process because we have seen God’s Word ourselves – God’s Word in the flesh. Jesus the Christ, the Emmanuel, the “God With Us”. The promises of God have already been fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Even though it may not look like it out there, we are living under the reign of God. Even though we keep making more swords than plowshares and more spears than pruning hooks, we live in the hope of reversal and the confidence that even now, God’s will is being done. God’s reign is imminent, (here and now) and not simply transcendent (beyond our reach).

As an Easter people living in an Advent world, we live in the knowledge that we have seen God's Word and know that it is God who will have the last Word over everything, over our anxieties, over violence, over death and even over Donald Trump. Our call to live in the Advent world is one of participation in God's reign, that no matter who the world puts into power, we are agents of God's peace, justice, love and hope. We live into this Advent world, not by simply waiting for the shoe to drop, but by keeping the shoes polished, and by keeping them on our feet, walking alongside God With Us

About that day and hour, no one knows – so says Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. And that can be a scary proposition for many as the world turns day by day, but my friends know this – that we have seen God's Word dwell with us – the Jerusalem lifted high above all the other cities, the one and true King who has come and will keep coming until his reign is fully established.

And now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guide our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen!