

Sermon for November 29th, 2020

1st Sunday of Advent (Year B)

Sermon Texts: Isaiah 64: 1-9 and 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9

Sermon Title: *Gratitude for the Already*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION:

O God, like a shepherd you guide us, and like a potter you shape us. We are waiting for your presence. Come to us as fire and burn away any resistance we might have that holds us back from your presence. Shape us with your hands that we might be vessels to receive your presence. We kneel at the stable, Holy One, waiting and willing to place our trust in you. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION:

Holy Spirit, come to us this first Sunday in Advent. In the dark of the year, we are waiting to see clearly what is hidden in the darkness. We are waiting for the Christ child; in the darkness we light a candle to remind us of the one who is to come. Open our hearts and our minds that Holy Life might come and dwell in us. Amen.

The challenge after Thanksgiving is to figure out all the ways that the leftover turkey can be used: turkey sandwiches (my favorite), chutney turkey burgers, turkey meatballs, and ground turkey loaf. To my mind, the Canadian Thanksgiving is well placed in early October, because by Christmas day you are ready to eat turkey again. But there's another reason as well. Thanksgiving just seems to open the floodgates of consumerism. Santa may not be at the Fashion Square Mall this year, but the catalogues arrive relentlessly through the mail, and the internet is full of sales, gift ideas according to price range, and suggestions for decorating your house and yard even if no one is coming to your house because of COVID-19. The day after Thanksgiving, Black Friday, is the busiest shopping day of the year. There's no evidence that this year, even with the virus, will be different.

However, the disconnect between the secular calendar and the church calendar is never as great as it is on this first Sunday of Advent. Ostensibly, both are preparing the world for Christmas. *Here comes Santa Claus* and *Jingle Bell Rock* compete with the quiet faith of *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus* and the joyous love of *People, Look East*. The church and the world are both waiting for something. Paul's letter to the Corinthians tells Christians that waiting for the future coming of Christ is nurtured by looking backward gratefully at the gifts we have already been given in Christ: grace, enrichment through Christ in speech and knowledge, and our testimony strengthened. We have already been given the spiritual gifts as we wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Corinthian culture was not so very different from our own. Paul calls them *people of the flesh*. They are competitive, arrogant, anxious, self-indulgent, and divisive. We find out later in the Corinthian epistle that the church has issues. There are meat eaters and there were vegetarians. The actual debate was between those who ate meat sacrificed in pagan temples and those who refused to eat such meat. There were matters of marriage and sexuality.

Wealthy members of the church ignored the poorer ones. Some believed that they were already living the resurrected life and others did not believe in the resurrection at all. During his two years in the church at Corinth, Paul will be giving advice on hairstyles, something I am not prepared to do (unless of course you ask).

Yet, Paul begins his letter to them, as he did to the Ephesians, with gratitude. *I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind.* Paul reminds them that God has already been very generous to them.

Paul's thanksgiving moves the focus of the church away from human standards to the grace of God that is the source of the church's *peace*, the second word in Paul's greeting: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* Grace is certainly linked to forgiveness, but as Paul uses the word here, it is an empowering force for discipleship.

This power can be seen in our individual lives and corporately in the church. Let me give you two examples.

The first example is mine. I never intended to be in a parish setting. One of my motives for going to seminary was to be qualified to teach religion courses at PVCC, so I could get out of grading so many bad English papers. Even when I was doing an internship at First Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville for my seminary degree, I had not taken the five ordination exams, one of which was only given once a year. However, when I was in the pulpit either preaching or leading the liturgy, someone would come up to me after the worship service and say *I love your voice*. In all my years of teaching I can't remember a student making that comment. I think what the worshippers at First meant was that I had a low voice for a woman, and I projected so they could hear me if they were sitting at the back of the church's huge sanctuary. But the frequency of the comments helped me to think about *voice* in a different way. As a writer and a student of literature, I knew that every piece of writing, poetry or prose, email or letter, carries a voice by the way the writer uses language.

What was God saying to me about how God wanted me to use my voice? God was slowing me down so I had the opportunity to think and pray about where I was heading, and several pastors and Christian friends helped me articulate what I began to discern about my calling. That was nothing but pure grace, and I have no doubt that that grace moved like a dynamic force empowering me for the journey ahead.

The same thing can happen corporately in a church. As forgiven people, as thankful people, we can move into the world empowered by grace to bear fruit. In the months and years ahead, South Plains will need this grace to re-imagine her role in this community. Who is South Plains? What does she hope to do? How will she know where the spirit is leading?

In an elder training session this week, we talked about an article in our study book by Clifton Kirkpatrick on the church. One of the elements of the church is discerning the mind of Christ.

Kirkpatrick writes: *The purpose of our governance is not to balance political interests in the church, but to enable elected spiritual leaders (ministers and elders) – together in prayer, dialogue, and reflections of God’s Word – to best discern the mind of Christ for the church and for the world.* That spoke clearly to me, in that this prayer, dialogue, and reflection should have a time and place for the leadership to listen to God’s word for the church.

We are the same church theologically as that early church in Corinth. Paul reminds the Corinthians who they are. They already possess the gifts that they need – the gifts of grace, knowledge, and speech. And so does South Plains. The God who has called us into fellowship with Jesus has gifts for us and for this church beyond anything we could hope or imagine. Knowing who South Plains is and to whom she belongs allows you to identify yourselves as children of God and to claim Christmas theologically as a powerful example of hope. To hope for the future begins in thanksgiving for what we already have.

So, bring on the store Santas and the commercial elevator Christmas music. We are ready. God has entered human history, has pitched a tent among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Let us give thanks for this season, for Christ, and for God’s grace in him. In a children’s book called *The Secret of Saying Thanks*, Douglas Wood writes: *The heart that gives thanks is a happy one, for we cannot feel thankful and unhappy at the same time. The more we say thanks (and I would add saying thanks to God), the more we find to be thankful for. And the more we find to be thankful for, the happier we become. We don’t give thanks because we’re happy. We are happy because we give thanks.* I think that is pretty good advice for this first Sunday of Advent. Amen.