

The Days are Coming

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, November 29, 2009**

Sermon Prayer:

Please pray with me. Gracious God we do thank you for the good gift of your creation.

And as we gather around your Word this day, we pray that your Word will come into our lives, will take root and grow within us and within our congregation that we may truly grow into the likeness of Christ and may be strengthened and equipped to follow his way. And so we pray that you will speak to us as a church this day, Lord, that you will use this service to transform our lives and indeed make us more Christ-like in our living and in our faith. Amen.

Sermon:

As I think of the word "hope" I think of people who have had life-transforming experiences. Perhaps you are one of those people who've had an experience in your lifetime that caused you to step back and evaluate the path that you were taking and to take a look at that path in light of your faith and your relationship with God and with God's people.

I remember many years ago when an Anglican by the name of Terry Waite who was held hostage and he had nothing in his dark dreary cell where he was in solitary confinement but his memory, and in particular his memory of the *Book of Common Prayer* which you would find in any Episcopal church or any Anglican church. He remembered pieces of that book and when he was released and freed from his captivity, Terry Waite shared with the world that it was his memory of the prayers, his memory of the liturgies that were in the *Book of Common Prayer* that actually had sustained him during that time of being held hostage. And it was that *Book of Common Prayer* and his memory of that book

that transformed his life while being held hostage. It strengthened his relationship with God to the point where when he was released he made drastic changes in the way he lived his life.

Have you had an experience like that in your life? Maybe it was an automobile crash that caused you to suddenly realize how fragile life is, and how changes needed to be made in your own life to strengthen you for that journey. Perhaps it was a serious illness, during your treatment of that illness that you suddenly realized that there is a power greater than yourself that is God Almighty, and it realigned the way you were living your life with your family, with your friends and at work. Perhaps it was on the battlefield, we hear many stories of those who served their nation in the military and come home transformed people because they saw just how fragile life is and their lives were transformed by that experience. I once knew a pastor in our conference who on the battlefield in the middle of battle in a foxhole gave his life to God and said, "If Lord I ever survive this war, I will serve you to the end of my days." And when he came home he became a pastor in our conference and served God faithfully as a pastor in our conference.

I think Advent is a time in the life of the church that seeks to create a crisis for us. I think it's a time that if we hear, we truly hear what the prophets are saying (their word is at the center of our worship during Advent), if we truly hear what God is saying to us through those prophets we will find ourselves in a crisis of faith having to choose between the path that we are on and the path that we believe God may be calling us to step out into. Advent, if we take it seriously, can be a time of crisis and a time of decision for us. At the heart of the prophets call is calling each and everyone of us back to a life transforming relationship with God, to not take our faith as usual, to not take it for granted, to not keep it on the book shelf or on the back burner of our life, but to bring our faith to the forefront and to allow our days and our deeds to allow our very lives to be ordered by God and the values of God's kingdom.

God's kingdom is established upon God's justice for all. God's kingdom is established on a principle of caring for those who are unable to care for themselves in our

communities. God's kingdom is established upon a principle of those who have the ability sharing with those who do not have the ability to meet the basic needs of life. And so often this season of Advent in our society here in America is a season of excesses. We just saw this past Friday an attempt to get us to part with our hard earned money to provide gifts for our family and friends. But did we stop before we bought those gifts to say "Is this something that my family really needs? Or is this just something we want?" Advent causes us, if we take it seriously, to ask ourselves, what is it we really need in this life verses what is it that we want and to hold off on the wants, but to attend to the needs of our lives and then to use our resources to attend to the needs of others' lives. I'm deeply touched by the way we responded to twenty-two families most of whom are right here in the New Brunswick community by offering a Thanksgiving meal for those families. That's the kind of thing that Advent causes us to do, to step back and say can I share from my abundance so that someone might have a basic necessity in life.

Today the prophet Jeremiah reminds us that our lives are grounded on the promises of God. That is at the heart of our baptismal covenant what we hold so dear in our fellowship and what we celebrate, especially in the lives of little infants. It is why we only practice baptizing an individual once in a lifetime. Because it is grounded upon God's promises that never change and are always available to us. In fact, God promises in baptism to incorporate us into his acts of salvation. A promise we carry for a lifetime and on into eternity. And so to practice rebaptism would be to call into question the sincerity of God in making these promises.

Today, we are reminded that the promises that God has made to Israel and Judah are being fulfilled. They have already started to break into this life, not just through the words of the prophet, but through the word become flesh in Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God that touches our lives is here and now, and yet it is to come. The fullness of that kingdom has yet to be realized and it only can be realized as God finds in us those who are willing to follow the way of Christ; to engage in acts of mercy and justice; to boldly speak out on behalf of those who

have no voice; to give of ourselves that others lives might be filled. These are indeed difficult times in which we find ourselves and in which the world finds itself as economies are challenged and household economies are devastated.

I would like to share this thought with you that comes from one of our United Methodist clergy in our conference. His name is Robin Van Cleef. He is a retired pastor in our conference and has submitted many poems to our conference *Relay*. The one he submitted for Thanksgiving 2009 I think speaks to our times right now and challenges us to live as a people of hope. Robin is revisiting Habakkuk 3:17-19 which read: Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

Reverend Van Cleef writes: Though the banks fail, and the economy shrivels, and the unemployment lines grow long; though the sick are left without access to healthcare, and the homeless have no place to stay; though war continues to rage, and there is no end in sight; yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; God empowers me in my weakness, and equips me for service. God makes provision for my daily needs and awakens me to the needs of others; God comforts me in my extremity and delivers me from harm. I will rejoice and give thanks for the Lord is good and makes of each day a Day of Thanksgiving.

Thanks be to God, Amen.