



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"Getting your Advent on" - The Second Sunday of Advent - 12/6/2020

In the name of the blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have often thought of the gift. It has been. To have our brothers in Christ, Father Chris Harris and his husband, Joe Bruglio move a couple of years ago from blindingly sunny, always warm, practically perfect weather in San Diego to be with us here in Michigan with its cold, dark and barren winters.

I remember the first time Father Chris came out to Michigan in the winter. He was going to present at our stewardship retreat. He got to the airport and I cannot remember, but neither Father Bill, nor I could go to pick him up. I believe we had a funeral or something like that. So Chris said, "No worries. I will rent a car." So when he got to the car, it was covered in snow, like four to six inches. And so he calls Bill and he says, "So how do I get the snow off the car?" Bill told him to pop the trunk and look for a snow scraper. And I think that was the first time ever that Father Chris drove in a snowstorm.

Thank God that experience did not turn him off, even though he did pass on the sides of the road, multiple cars stuck in ditches. Because Chris was given by God and innate knack for Michigan roads, he impressively became an instant expert driver, mastering Michigan lefts in the midst of a snow storm. I like to think that that very moment as he was trying to drive through this great thing that is the snow storms in Michigan, that very moment is when Chris fell in love with Michigan. And I bet he and Joe do not miss those balmy Decembers in California.

I'm so glad for those of us who get to live in the northern parts of the States in December. The environment outside brisk, darker for longer, more stark, the cold and the wind driving us all indoors. All of that helps me develop the inner space that I need to have a very holy advent season. There is something about the hibernating nature that can make us want to spend some time in the interior of our homes and in the interior of our minds. Collecting thoughts, dreams, and visions, taking stock of what we're doing and resetting to determine what is important, what is right, what it is that God wants from us while we wait for the changing of the season around the bend.

And those of you who are participating and watching and worshipping with us, those of you that are stuck in those sunny places like Florida or Arkansas or

Arizona right now, even though I do feel sorry for you because you don't have nose-hair freezing weather. And you don't have pitch black evenings where you're fumbling to figure out which key goes into the house lock. And you don't have frozen grounds and sidewalks that make walking anywhere and adventure. I still invite you to join us northerners, to think about the bleak midwinter, snow on snow and get your advent on. Turn more inside and more inward in order to do the preparation of the coming of the Lord.

And here is what I have been contemplating the second weekend of the advent season. I have been thinking about how God asks some people, people who know God and are known by God, people who love God and are loved by God. God asks these people to live for others during difficult times.

I'm reminded of a story a member of our church often told me about his grandmother who lived during the time of the Depression and then World War II. She was a devout Catholic. And the way that she expressed her faith was to invite everyone to the table for Sunday dinner. She believed no one should go hungry during the Lord's Day. And she would work all weekend to accomplish this amazing act of kindness and to make sure that there was always enough food for anyone that would show up at her door.

And they did. Anyone showed up, all kinds of people. People who were looking for a meal and people who were looking for a kind word during harsh adversity. And it turned out that this work was easy for her because of her face and because she knew that she needed to help anyone who needed the help, but especially the poor ones, the ones who had nothing, the homeless, the ones in her town who were struggling and suffering.

And those were hard times. There were no guarantees even for her that she would be able to make it through and her fortunes would continue. And there was no knowing when the end of the Depression would happen. And there was no knowing when the end of the war would happen, but she lived by a verse in the book of Proverbs, Proverbs 14:31. "If you oppress poor people, you insult the God who made them; but kindness shown to the poor is an act of worship." She believed she was born into the world at that time to do just this.

I was thinking of John, the Baptist, who we'd heard about in our gospel story. He was called by God to usher in the new age and the new reign of God made possible through Jesus Christ. What an immense role for one person. So he knew he had to do something a little odd, a little askew to get the attention of others, but more importantly to mark it as a transformative experience in the lives of people. He had to sacrifice his own normalcy for the sake of creating a space to help others envision a new start, a new way of being, a new way of seeing, a new way of living because Jesus had entered into the world. Nothing could be the same again, it was the beginning of the good news. So John gave

himself away for the sake of others because he knew he was born at that time in this world to do just this.

But more poignant to me were the people of God who experienced the capture and conquest of their nation, the Israelites, they are our spiritual ancestors. And in 586 BC, the Kingdom of Judah is conquered by the Babylonians and the people lost everything. They lost their homes. They lost their land. They lost all of their livelihood. They lost their freedom. They became captives and many were forced to go into another country. And many stayed under Babylonian rule. It was a terrible, difficult time to live through, but it was made even more difficult because in essence, they got what they deserved and they deserved what they got.

They didn't live with justice and peace in their nation. They didn't live taking care of each other. They engaged in warfare. They oppressed the poor. They didn't take care of the elderly among them or the vulnerable among them. And profits warned them again and again, this is not what God wants. God cannot be pleased with what we're doing. And, yet, the people kept doing it over and over as if they were immune to the cost of unrighteousness and injustice.

So when they fell, they fell hard and they had no one to blame but themselves. And it is at that moment at the beginning of the exile, which would last 70 years, that God intervenes and tells the people of God what to do: comfort them, comfort the people who have just experienced such a great tragedy. Speak tenderly to them. The great Advent hymn, which we will sing at the end of our worship service states it so beautifully:

"Comfort, comfort all my people;
Speak of peace," so says our God.
"Comfort those who sit in darkness,
Groaning from their sorrows' load.
Speak to all Jerusalem
Of the peace that waits for them;
Tell them that their sins I cover,
That their warfare now is over."

In the midst of great darkness, a light breaks in. In the midst of overwhelming despair, a word of comfort is given. As we grown with our broken hearts while longing and waiting, God speaks tenderly to us. It will soon be over. Such is the work of Advent in the bleak midwinter. We acknowledge the difficulties and the painful reality. And yet advent always prepares us for the surprising appearance of God to come and save us again and again.

But I want you to remember, beloved, that whose words that were uttered by the prophet, Isaiah, those words were spoken to the people who were suffering themselves, the ones who were in exile, they had undergone excruciating loss

and despair, but it was they who were chosen and called by God to offer comfort to others, to all those around them who were hurting, just like that parishioner's grandmother during the Great Depression, just like John the Baptist awaiting for the coming of the Savior. Those Israelites had been born at that time in the world to do just this.

And 2,500 years later, as I ponder this Advent when we are all facing the agony of a world that has experienced 1.5 million people who have died unexpectedly. And in the last nine months, millions of lives disrupted because of a world economy groaning under the burden of a seemingly never ending epidemic. You and I have been born into the world at this time, comfort people and speak tenderly to them.

But first, be yourself comforted by God. What words does your hibernating Advent heart need to hear? The vaccine will work. You'll be okay. Normal will return. We will stop bickering with each other. This shall pass, justice will come. God is going to lift up those who are bowed down. Be comforted yourself by the God who knows all of your needs and your desires, and whose peace will surround you, and whose healing love is tending to you right now.

And then once you feel the warmth of God in these cold dark days, then comfort others. Tell them that God's love shines in the darkness. Tell them that hope will heal the soul. Tell them that God is making a way forward. Tell them we are going to see each other again and hold each other and hug each other. Tell them we are not alone. Tell them that it's okay if they doubt, because you will believe for them.

Our preparation of Advent this year is not just for ourselves. There are people out there who are scared, who are struggling, who are in pain, who are in deep anxiety, and they do not know how they're going to make it. So this year, we prepare for the advent of Jesus Christ for the sake of others. So we can comfort those who have been eating the bread of anxiety this past year, console them, speak words of kindness and be tender to them. Tell them that God is here, assure them that God will provide what they need, listen to their troubles. And in exchange, offer them good tidings of comfort and peace so they may experience some joy, because you were born into this world at this time to do just this.

Amen.

[End of Recording]