

Rappahannock Christian Church – 11-28-10
Dr. Kenneth Wilbur

Advent Reading

- We light one candle as a light in the darkness- reminding us that hope shines before us.
- We live in a world with so much uncertainty and fear that it is often difficult to be too hopeful
- Our global fears of war, disease, and the rages of nature sit alongside our personal fears of rejection, loss of those we love, and financial insecurity.
- This candle reminds us that Christ is coming. He is already here, but coming again to add light to our lives.
- Let us be filled with hope.

God, you alone are the answer to our fears. So often it is not our first thought to lay our fears at your feet, but we know that you alone keep us safe. Brighten us with hope, so that we may look for Your presence with us this season. Grant us hearts able to focus on the true gift of the season -- Your son -- instead of the commercialism and the busyness.
AMEN.

Communion Meditation

I'm not going to go so far as to say that it's providential or that God made it happen, but I do think it's cool that Thanksgiving comes right before Advent because at Thanksgiving we think about what we're thankful for and then during Advent we begin to think about Jesus and how very thankful we are for His coming and the salvation that He brought to us - the greatest gift God has given!

Here in this season when we are beginning to think about Christ's coming. He was "sent," as He himself said, by the Father. So we should think about Him when we come to this Table. These Elements of Bread and Cup are symbols of what He has done and why we should be thankful to Him. In Matthew's Gospel we read these words of Jesus about the celebration that we make at this Table.

Matthew 26:26-29 – While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Longing

Our Scripture this morning is from the 2nd chapter of Luke's Gospel. Here we enter the Advent readings of the season. Luke has a rather long section of these readings, which tell us the story of

Jesus' birth and even some of his early childhood. Luke's account is really the most detailed one that we've been given.

Luke 2:25-32 – Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

I know that this story is a little out of order for this week, as it comes *after* Jesus is already born. Here we have the parents of Jesus bringing Him to the temple to be presented to the priest for circumcision. He is already 8 days old. With your permission I'd like to “jump around” a little bit in the chronology of the Christmas story during these Advent messages, and this one, about an old man named Simeon is where I'd like to start.

This story is about a man who was longing and yearning for something. He was longing and yearning for the Lord's salvation. We also long and yearn as we look ahead to Christmas day because of the celebration we will have of the birth of our Lord and of His sacrifice in clothing Himself with humanity and coming to dwell among us to save us.

This reminds me of the old fairy tale about Pinocchio. In the story, the father, a wood carver, longs and yearns for a son. He carves the marionette, and he is given his wish as the puppet comes to life.

Is there something you have really longed for? Think back... Perhaps you have yearned for children of your own, love, maybe a special car, a pet, even to lose weight or get out of debt. You know, it seems that throughout our lives there are things we yearn for. Sometimes the things we want so badly are things we can make happen for ourselves, so we work hard to try to make them happen. But we obviously cannot control everything.

In this story, Simeon is longing for something he cannot make happen. He has to depend on God for His hope to be realized. He is longing for the salvation of Israel.

There is much of this longing expressed in Scripture. For example, at the end of Jeremiah God promises the Children of Israel that there will be a day when they will be given a New Covenant. He says the Messiah will come and that He will be a great Savior. All of Israel longed for this. They thought of it in earthly terms; that God would give them their nation back, that they would be free from their oppressors, their cities would again be strong and walled. They thought the Messiah would bring them the good life. This is what they longed for.

There are other Scriptures which express longing, too. Listen to the personal plea for help that we find in Psalm 6:

*LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;
heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.
My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, LORD, how long? – Psalm 6:1-3*

Now listen to Psalm 13. This is one of my favorite psalms. The psalms are part of the writings of the Jewish people. Notice how their prayers tend to be different from ours. Where we tend to come to God in flowery and pious tones, they are more likely to just bare their hearts and say what is on their minds. Listen to the longing of this psalmist:

*How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me? – Psalm 13:1-2*

In our Scripture today we see that Simeon was anxiously waiting for the promises that God had made to Israel to come about. He longed for the Messiah who would come and inaugurate the new era.

As Christians we also have longings. Wouldn't it be nice if the moment you became a Christian you were transformed and translated straight into heaven to be with Christ? But that's not the way it happens. Instead we journey here. Not everything happens the way we want, or even the way we might expect.

So we, as Christians, long too. Anguished words of longing are expressed in the New Testament, as well. Listen to Paul in Romans 8:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. – Romans 8:18-23

So here we are in the season of Advent. We are preparing ourselves. We long for, and intensely anticipate, the coming of Christmas day because it represents the coming of God's Son, our Savior, into the world.

Let me end by reading this little Advent meditation.

In Isaiah 64 Isaiah says, "Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down to make known your name to your enemies, and make the nations tremble at your presence, working unexpected miracles such as no one has ever heard before."

When does our longing for Christmas Day begin? Now that Thanksgiving is over and we are thinking about Christmas decorations and gift lists, we feel a longing which will grow as we approach Christmas Day.

You and I know what the feeling of longing is like. By the end of May you can't wait for the last day of school to come. After months of work with little rest, you look forward to the first day of a well-earned vacation.

Longing is not like the pain of a toothache or a cut finger. Longing is that kind of feeling which seems to come from the heart and spreads from your foot to your head.

The prophet Isaiah expresses a most intense longing. He remembers the "glory" days of Moses when the appearance of God on Mt. Sinai was accompanied with thunder, lightning, and fire (Exodus 19:16-18). We might criticize Isaiah for wanting a showy display of divine power, but if only we could feel Isaiah's deep longing for God to come into our lives, our Advent preparation would go a long way toward opening our hearts to receive God's grace.

Benediction

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ, our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen. – Jude 1:24-15