

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24, John 1: 6-8, 19-28
Olivet Church, C'ville, VA, December 17, 2017

“Oaks of Righteousness”

More than one hundred million people in the United States will be travelling over the Christmas Holiday. You may be familiar with the challenges of travelling over the holidays, especially with young children, and especially before the advent of car console video players and personal electronic game devices. Shortly after getting out of town and onto the highway someone calls from the back seat, “how much longer till we get there?” “We just got on the road,” you say, “it’ll be at least seven more hours.” And then a short time later, the question comes again. “About ten minutes less than the seven hours I just told you,” you say.

I heard of a dad who got so tired of answering that question he finally said, “If you ask that question again you will have time out in your room when we get to grandma’s house.” That seemed to do the trick until the child spoke from the back seat again, saying, “Daddy, how old will I be when we get there?”

Faith is about waiting for something with a sure and certain hope; even as we live in and move toward it. We are waiting for the fullness of life we have in Christ even as we walk each day in newness of life in him. We are waiting for the fullness of Christ’s kingdom even as we serve and witness amidst the pain, suffering, darkness, and violence of this world. Like bored and impatient children we are prone to ask, “how much longer till we get there?” God does not reveal to us when that day will be, the Bible teaches. But the Bible, and Advent, teach us to live expectantly as we await the fullness of what we are in Christ Jesus, and what the world is when God’s will is fully done here on earth.

Our Old Testament reading assures us of a completeness and blessedness that we will know through God’s grace and power. Isaiah speaks of a reversal of conditions, a growing in holiness, a standing in righteousness. The good news of this fundamental transformation of reality is articulated in very concrete terms: the crushed are healed, the indebted freed, the prisoners released, the mourners filled with gladness. And this promised transformation was seen in Jesus, who, according to Luke 4, went back to his home synagogue after his struggle with the devil in the wilderness, read today’s scripture from Isaiah 61, sat down and said, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The prophet proclaims, John the Baptist witnesses to, Jesus accomplishes, and Paul instructs us on living into our freedom, salvation, and true identity and status as “oaks of righteousness;” tall, sturdy, sheltering, majestic witnesses to God’s glory.

During Advent, we remind ourselves, and celebrate anew, the unbelievably good news that God is not aloof, distracted, or disinterested in us in some far-away heaven. But rather in love for us and the world, in order to save and restore us as God’s children and God’s creation, God came as “Immanuel,” (God with us) taking human flesh, living and ministering among us in Jesus Christ. We remind ourselves and celebrate the fulfillment of all that was promised and hoped for; we are indeed God’s beloved children, we have become mighty and beautiful oaks of righteousness.

Imagine what it would have been like for the ugly duckling to have known all along that he was actually a beautiful, graceful swan. Imagine the trouble and nose extension Pinocchio would have avoided, if he had just trusted that he was uniquely created and loved by his father. Imagine the peace, comfort, and courage we would experience if we would trust in our hearts that we are God's beloved children.

Sarah Thebarger flew to Houston to speak to a few hundred teenagers at a Christian youth gathering. She told them her story of having breast cancer in her 20s, about what a dark season of life it had been. On the nights she spent in the hospital with a raging infection that nearly killed her, she'd lie awake and stare at the ceiling and wonder where God was. "Do you see me? Do you love me? Do you care about what's happening in my life?" she prayed.

She told them how she eventually got better and moved to Oregon to start her life over. And every Sunday, she'd go to church and pray for God to find her because she felt so lost. Then one Sunday she realized that the love of God was higher, wider and deeper than anything that happens in this world. She realized that she was not only found by God, but never — even for a single second — had she ever been lost.

At the close of her talk, she looked at the students and said, "I promise you that at some point in your life, something will happen that is difficult and painful. Something that you don't understand, that you don't want, that you don't like. And in that moment, you're going to think that God doesn't love you, God has abandoned you, God has forgotten all about you. And some of you are here right now — you've lost someone you loved, or a relationship ended badly, or you're getting bullied mercilessly. But you are here tonight just to hear me tell you this: God. Loves. You. God sees you, cares about you, and even when you don't feel him near you, God is holding onto you every step of the way."

When the youth were dismissed from the session, many lined up to buy a copy of her book and get it signed. After the lobby emptied, an overweight teenage boy with thick glasses came up to the table clutching a copy of her book. He handed it to her to sign, which she did. Instead of walking away, he stood there in front of her. Finally, he broke the silence. "Would it be okay if you hugged me?" he asked. She walked around the table and held her arms out. He wrapped his arms around her waist and clung to her. "God sees you, God loves you, God cares about you," she whispered. And she could feel his shoulders shaking as he cried.

It would be near impossible to enjoy or find meaning in life if we did not have this hope, this blessed assurance. If we felt that God was not present in and mysteriously at work in the circumstances of our lives and world. If we believed that death was a true ending, a final extinguishing of our life; do you think we would be able to enjoy the things that give us pleasure: a hike in the woods, reading the newspaper over a cup of coffee, watching a grandchild's soccer game?

Preacher Tom Long tells a story about Rabbi Hugo Gryn who was sent to Auschwitz as a little boy. One cold winter's evening in the midst of death and immense suffering in the concentration camp, Hugo's father gathered the family in the barracks. It was the first night of Chanukah, the

Festival of Lights. The young child watched as his father took a pad of butter and made a makeshift candle using a string from his ragged clothes. He then took a match and lit the candle.

“Father, no!” Hugo cried. “That is our last bit of food! How will we survive?”

“We can live for many days without food,” his father said. “But we cannot live a single minute without hope. This is the light of hope. Never let it go out. Not here. Not anywhere.”

When travelling with my kids to see family they would often spot the large sign on an interstate highway indicating an exit for the interstate to our destination city. They would see “Wilmington”, or “Tampa” on the sign and scream with delight, “We’re there!” “Not quite” I’d say. “It’s another three hours, but at least you know we’re not lost. We are on the right road.”

Our Advent preparations, celebrations, and rituals are not the end, but rather the means, the road to take, toward the fullness to come. We learned that lesson as a child when we tore through the wrapping paper to lift out that toy we’d seen on TV that we thought would bring pure joy and contentment, only to find ourselves surly and bored later in the day. We learned that lesson as adults when even a perfect round of gift-giving, and visits with loved ones around the holiday meal, left us with an aching longing for something that was still missing. We’re not there yet.

Paul directs us in our journey to embrace practices that God can use to shape our hearts and minds and sanctify our lives so that we will be found trusting in, living in, witnessing to Christ when our earthly journey ends, or Christ returns. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances,” he says. “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

Joy, gratitude, prayerfulness. Openness to the Spirit and submission to the word of God in scripture are not an end in themselves. And they are not about external conformity for our prayer will always be rote and reluctant, our gratitude insincere, and our rejoicing a Pollyannaish peppiness detached from the realities, pain and loss of life. Joy, gratitude and prayerfulness are both the means and the fruit of an internal transformation by the Spirit that we do not quench, and God’s word which we open our hearts, minds, and lives to. And through that transformation our emotional state becomes less and less determined by the circumstances of life, so that we are happy only when things are going our way. Rather beneath the more apparent melody line of our lives with our successes and failures, losses and blessings, challenges and good fortune... there arises a joyful, grateful, prayerful ground note that grows stronger, louder, and more resonate as we mature in faith, walk further into the new life and kingdom in Christ.

When I was a child we had to entertain ourselves on long trips across North Carolina and Tennessee with different games like counting cows on your side of the highway, or being the first to get through the alphabet using the first letter of words seen on road signs. And of course there were the endless rounds of songs like “found a peanut” and “you can’t get to heaven in a rocking chair.” One song we always sang while on the road was “She’ll be coming around the mountain.” I remember thinking, as a child, that the “she” who would be coming was “Granny”; who we were driving two days to go see. Then I began to find it odd that we were singing about her coming, when we were the ones that were doing all the travelling. I’m not sure when I

discovered that this African American spiritual is actually referring to the second coming of Jesus. Which makes it a good song to sing when you are travelling through life, and especially through Advent. It reminds us that even as Jesus has come to us, comes to us daily, and is coming again at the end of time, we are called into a journey with him, in him, and toward him.