

FCCS December 1, 2019

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“Hope Can’t Wait” Isaiah 2:1-5

The connections we make in the course of a life--maybe that's what heaven is. - Fred Rogers -

There was an interesting phenomenon is occurring in my little neighborhood during the week leading up to Thanksgiving, signs of Christmas were popping up all over. As you enter the road there are shiny ornaments hanging from a towering oak tree and decorations beaming in the yards of neighbors who, in prior years, have expressed not even an inkling of holiday spirit. Kids on the block are already wearing holiday themed sweatshirts, and I even overheard the receptionist in the doctor’s office say she was putting up her wreaths early this year, she just couldn’t wait until after Thanksgiving.

What can’t wait this year? Hope can’t wait.

Even the town of Sonoma put up its holiday light display in the square two weeks earlier than normal and people turned up in record numbers.

Political unrest coupled with natural and personal disasters this past fall have plumb worn people out. Collectively, we are ready for something to look forward to. We need a little Christmas, right this very minute.

Candles in the window, Carols at the spinet. Yes, we need a little Christmas, right this very minute- need a little Christmas now.

Well, here is some good news, in the Christian tradition, today marks the first Sunday in Advent, a season spanning the four weeks leading up to Christmas. Christmas morning marks the beginning of the twelve days of Christmas. Bonus points if you read the newsletter and can tell me why there are twelve days of Christmas.

Since some of you are newer to church and perhaps not as familiar with the cycle of the Christian year, I thought it might be helpful, on this the first Sunday of the new lectionary cycle, to offer a little background. What’s that, you’ve never heard of a lectionary? (a la Sam the snow man from Rudolph)

It’s simple, a lectionary is a collection of scripture organized for the purpose of study, worship and other significant communal gatherings.

Christian and Judaic worship have been built around lectionary cycles since before the turn of the century. From that tradition, the Catholic Church in Rome developed a formal resource to help priests’ find their way through the sacred scriptures. In 1994 The cycle was revised and became what is not known as the Revised Common Lectionary adhered to by most

Protestant and Catholic churches throughout the world. The idea is that if we hear the stories over and over again, year after year, we will pattern our lives after them in ways that bring the kingdom of God closer to us and us closer to the kingdom of God.

It all happens in a three-year loop; year A is the Gospel of Matthew, Year B the Gospel of Mark, and Year C focuses on the the Gospel of Luke, with other texts from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures incorporated throughout the year during various liturgical hot spots.

Today we begin year A; which means throughout the rest of 2019 and 2020 we will be exploring the Gospel of Mathew. Interestingly enough, it is a passage from Isaiah that kicks off the Advent season, and not a passage from Mathew- any idea why that might be? I will let you in on that secret momentarily.

It is worth knowing that Gospel of Mathew was not the first gospel written, yet is regarded as the most important book in the Christian cannon, thus its placement at the beginning of the Christian Scriptures. This is because the book of Mathew contains sayings, stories, and discourse that are not found in the other gospels and also because this gospel is laid out in a way that make Jesus' teachings slightly easier to follow than in the other gospels.

The Sermon on the Mount is a good example; in the Gospel according to Mark the texts that make up the Sermon on the Mount show up in several different locations, whereas in Mathew they are grouped together to form a more coherent narrative. Blessed are the... for they shall... Mathew constructed his text in this way to portray the importance of Jesus as a great teacher. Whereas for Mark, it was Jesus' miracles were what mattered most.

Ok, so why does a passage from Isaiah kick off the Advent season? Because Mathew had extremely high regard for the Hebrew scriptures.

He did not think of Christianity as something requiring a definitive break from Judaism, rather he saw it as a continuation and fulfillment of that which had been set forth by the prophets of old. In fact, there are fifteen instances in which Mathew interprets the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophesy.

In this morning's text the prophet Isaiah is preaching about God's promised day when wars would end, swords be beaten into plowshares, and spears become pruning hooks. Mathew envisioned Jesus as the one who ushered in God's kingdom and led God's people to walk in the light of love. Hence

this is how we start the new lectionary year- with the implication that the birth of Jesus foreshadows a prophecy fulfilled. This is called Messianic thinking.

In Abrahamic religions, a messiah is a savior or liberator of a group of people. The concepts of messianism, and of a Messianic Age originated with Judaism, and in the Hebrew Bible; a moshiach is a king or High Priest traditionally anointed with holy anointing oil. Messiahs were not exclusively Jewish: the Book of Isaiah refers to Cyrus the Great, king of the Achaemenid Empire, as a messiah for his decree to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. The Jews believed that the Messiah would come and liberate the Jewish people ushering in the Kingdom of God.

Followers of Jesus believed he was such a Messiah. But the early Christian church was of differing opinions concerning the coming of the Kingdom of God. One group believed that it was strictly a future event- an apocalyptic event. Others held the idea that the kingdom of God was already present insofar as right principles and motives were embedded in human hearts. Mathew tries to give voice to both perspectives and that is where we get the tension between the already and the not yet; what is and what is yet to be.

The thing to remember about the Gospel according to Mathew is that God is with us always to the ends of the earth- that is the good news. Emanuel, God with us.

In the twentieth century, although we find ourselves dealing with a very real possibility of the earth's destruction, it does not seem to serve as a particularly motivating force for deeper living. I think where we can find resonance is with the idea that God's kingdom is being gradually established gradually throughout the generations of the faithful.

God's vision for a better world is made manifest in how we treat one another, the planet and all its inhabitants.

That is good news, that is close in and it embodies a hope for which we cannot afford to wait. We cannot wait another moment, we need a little Christmas, we need a little kindness, we need a something to believe in and something to live for- right this very minute.

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