

## 2 Advent, Lessons & Carols (A) – December 4, 2016

Advent is traditionally a penitential season in the church year, sometimes called “Little Lent”. It seems a bit out of place to me to think of it this way, especially since we spend this time devotedly preparing for the joyful welcoming of a new life. And not just any baby (even though they are all very special), but the birth of our Lord and Saviour. Christmas songs are playing on the radio... and pretty near everywhere we go. We’re buying gifts for our friends and families, and for those who are in more need than we. We’re busily thinking about menus and preparing for our holiday meals. Making plans to welcome guests or to go be visitors ourselves. So why the focus on penitence in our Sunday readings during Advent?

There are lots of themes that run throughout the Bible. One of the most prevalent ones is that God has created a beautiful world for us and rescued us from our travails and shortcomings time and time again. But we are a fallen people, sinners from the get-go. We see it in our reading from Genesis this morning. Shortly after God created this amazing world humankind was given a prominent place in it, to enjoy all its blessings and to walk closely with God. But we messed up so quickly. Temptation got the better of us. Sin. Submitting to Satan. But God didn’t take away our lives. He clothed us and sadly sent us from the Garden.

But He still desires us still and is forever pleading with us to turn our hearts to him. We see it throughout the bible, in rescuing his people from Egypt, in the words of the prophets, in God’s promises to Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and Solomon. And down through time to Zechariah and Mary. He wants us back. He’ll do anything for us.

But we know one thing about ourselves, don’t we... that this original sin lives in us still? If you’re like me you may constantly be asking yourself, “Why did I say that? Wasn’t there some better way to respond? Why am I so mean and inconsiderate? Why am I always falling short of God’s goals for me? I’m sorry, God. I’ll try to do better. How can I know what you want me to do? How can I do it if you won’t show me how? Lead me Lord. I want to be like you. But I know I never will.”

Some synonyms for the word “penitence” are shame, remorse, regret, sorrow. These are tough, hard-hitting words that signify feeling bad... about ourselves. But other synonyms for “penitence” are contrition, repentance, atonement. While we may tend to wallow in self-pity and self-loathing, that’s not what God wants. We haven’t lost it all. God is there for us still. He loves us and wants us to bring him our deepest concerns.

So the thing about Advent is that it gives us a chance to dive into these feelings, to offer them up to God, to seek His help, to ask for guidance... simply to take comfort in the everlasting arms of our Father in heaven; to make ready to welcome God’s son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, and to prepare, yet again, to walk with him hand-in-hand through life’s journey; and to feel the life-giving, and life-restoring, Holy Spirit of God breath on us and fill our sails with faith and hope and love.

As we heard Isaiah speak, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. He will feed his flock like a shepherd: he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” And from Baruch, “God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.” To which we respond, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” ~ Amen.