

Sunday, December 15, 2024

Third Sunday of Advent

Advent Lessons & Carols

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1106120957845792>

(Sermon begins at about 47:45)

“Undergirding Salvation History”

Thus far in this Advent season, we have taken a deep dive into the unique nature of this four-week period. A liturgical season not quite like any other, with its multiple layers of meaning. We have looked at the various Advents—the various comings or arrivals—of Jesus into our midst. His Advent at his birth on Christmas. His Advent at the end of the ages at the Second Coming. And, between these two, his Advent in our day-to-day lives. All the while, watching and waiting, preparing for his arrival in all its manifestations.

These Advents span a period of time from 2,000 years ago to an as yet unknown point in the future at the end of the ages. Although, in many ways, the story of Advent spans the entirety of history—from the very first humans, represented by Adam and Eve in the story of Creation, to the culmination of salvation history with the ultimate fulfillment and realization of the Kingdom of God. The meaning of Advent undergirds, provides the foundational structure for, the arc of human history. For the arc of our relationship with God in what we refer to as salvation history. Salvation history being the “personal redemptive activity of God within human history in order to effect his eternal saving intentions.”¹ In other words, God’s ongoing actions to provide for our salvation.

To more fully appreciate and understand the significance of Advent to our history as children of God, we generally take one Sunday during this season when we interrupt our regular cycle of scripture readings and instead do a service of Advent Lessons and Carols. While the readings for each Sunday of Advent focus on a particular aspect, a particular meaning, of Advent, this service of Lessons and Carols zooms out and allows us a broader, macro level perspective on just why we have this four-week run-up to Christmas. A perspective that can only be achieved by a journey through the arc of salvation history, even if only in broad strokes.

There are a total of 15 readings which can be used for the service of Advent Lessons and Carols: 13 from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament. Of all these, there is one that is specifically required to be read. That is the first reading we heard from Genesis. The account of Adam and Eve rebelling against God and breaking the one command he gave them: to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The transgression for which they were cast out of the Garden of Eden in what is referred to as “The Fall.” The precipitating event for what is referred to as “original sin,” the condition of sinfulness that all humanity shares.

Why this one, of all the options? Perhaps because the events depicted and the resulting state of humanity are precisely why we need Advent in the first place. Why we need a Messiah to come into our midst. Why we need a Messiah to provide for our salvation. That being the inherent

sinfulness which separates us from God. The remaining Old Testament stories designated for Lessons and Carols then providing glimpses into various aspects of how, the means by which, God seeks to restore right relationship between him and humanity. Because while humanity may have turned its back on God, God never turned his back on humanity.

In the remaining readings for this morning, we hear one of the quintessential prophecies of the primary means that God will restore right relationship through the sending of his anointed: "Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God." God calling his people to prepare for their redemption: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord." We hear God's promise to establish a new covenant with his people: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." That we will become the embodiment of that covenantal relationship with God. We hear the prophet promising that God will save his people, so that "everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." And we hear yet another promise of the coming of the Messiah, this time with greater specificity: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him." The coming of One who will bring a fundamental shift in how the world operates: "The wolf shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

We conclude our readings with the act that sets into motion the fulfillment of all these ancient prophecies. The Annunciation, in which the archangel Gabriel reveals to Mary that God has chosen her to bear his son. The birth of Jesus being the first Advent of the One who is to come into our midst. The One, who through his life and ministry, through his death and resurrection, will forever change the world. The One through whom reconciliation between God and humanity is achieved. The One through whom salvation of all humanity is accomplished. All culminating in the Second Coming, the second Advent, at the end of the ages.

In this one service, we encapsulate the entirety of salvation history. From the fall of humanity and broken relationship with God; to God's attempts to achieve reconciliation; to the restoration of our covenantal relationship through Jesus Christ. A chain of events that achieves what God has desired for us and with us from the beginning of history: right relationship with him. A chain of events that demonstrates in no uncertain terms God's love for us, his beloved children. The love exemplified by the birth of God's Son at Christmas. The love exemplified by our salvation and eternal life promised at the end of the ages. The love that God has for us in every moment between.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvation_history