

So, this is the fourth Sunday in this short season of Advent. During this season we use the color blue to remind us it is a season of hope, it's a season of promise, and when we think about the word "Advent," it means "something is coming into being," right?

So, we have this beautiful set of readings for today about something coming into being new life, new hope, new promise so – [there's someone looking for their pew here... Okay... oh, here we are, now are feeling safe... and what a beautiful illustration to go with this text, right?]

So: something coming into being, and hope, and these words of promise, "God with us." When we think about Advent, we are kind of pushed to just think of the advent of the future: God coming again and all things being restored, no longer pain or loss or fear. That is the beautiful coming of Christ that we are longing for, right?

But in doing that, sometimes we forget that we have these three promises of Advent: what God has done for us in the past, what God is doing for us now, and what God is doing into the future.

So, God is responsible for salvation and bringing forth these promises. It frees us from the work that we often hear that we need to be doing during Advent. God is doing God's work. And part of that work of this Advent *now* is working within each of us in our hearts, when we hear God's word and respond; in our communities as we discern together what is needed, where action needs to be; where we see and experience that there is a need for forgiveness, that there's a need, first, for repentance, right? There's a need for action, and love, and true community, where none are forsaken or forgotten, isolated or alone, where nobody is living in fear, or places of war and conflict, where we are working together – not to bring about what God is going to do, but doing our part for the sake of each of us. Because we are called forth in love, to **be** love.

If it was dependent on us, things would never happen the way they're meant to happen, because we are sinful, hurting, human beings. But we call each other together and we are welcomed by God's call for us to become the body of Christ. We come to this place of worship, not in order to be saved – that was the old way of doing things; this was a penance. Does it feel like it sometimes probably right now, while I'm preaching you understand that, right? You came as a penance and you got this little reward, that gift of salvation – but that's not how we believe that it works anymore.

We come together as community into places of worship, to hear *God's saving word for us*. To hear the good news, to be strengthened, to share with those around us who know us, and love us, and support us on this journey. We come because we are quick to forget "*for you*." This is my body given *for you*. This is my blood poured out *for you*. And in our gospel reading for today and in our Old Testament reading we are reminded that this has been God's plan for us **for ever**.

God with us. Knowing us, understanding us, in human form, so He can truly understand what it is to be human, to take on these fleshy bodies, to grieve and to rejoice, to struggle and to thrive, to see what it is we need.

And God has provided it for us in a way that we will never fully understand; on this instrument of torture and the gift of new life, where we no longer need fear tomorrow, and what it might bring. We no longer need fear death, because we have been promised and given life.

God with us. Emmanuel. The good news declared in a way that we can *maybe* begin to understand. Jesus: in a family, nurtured and cared for, just as God asks us to nurture and care for each other, and for the seed of faith which has been implanted within us, so that it can thrive and grow, and we can grow into the people that God desires us to be: beloved children of God, who hear God's word and respond.

Where we recognize our sins of omission and commission and work to change that, where we hear and believe that our sins are forgiven, and respond out of that gift in a way that provides life for all of God's creation.

Here we hear about Joseph, who is so sadly neglected in our Gospel, and easily overlooked because, well, he wasn't that necessary, sometimes, right, in the story?!

But here he is *so necessary*! He hears the angel's word, and he steps up. He fulfills that promise of the man that he is, a man of righteousness who does the right thing. It would have been easier to put Mary aside and say "Yeah, she's not quite what I thought she was." But God says, "Here, you are to support and sustain and care and give a name, and make this possible."

The first one, in this story, to believe and respond in a way that all of creation can hear God's promise *for you*.

God continues to speak to us in ways that we don't always understand and sometimes have to be interpreted for us. So today, I invite you. I invite you to come to this table; to taste and see and know that God is good; to feel the weight of your sins fall off your shoulders; to rejoice, fully, with all that you are and all that you have; to go forth from this sanctuary without fear, into whatever the day might hold, knowing that God goes with you.

And I also want you to go forth in this season of Advent, with new eyes and a new heart, to see God working within you and around you, to bring about God's plan, where we are all united together, without stain or blemish.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.