

First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2020

(If you are home read the prayers and scripture readings and recite the Creed aloud, even if you are by yourself, in order to hear with the ears each one. Sing or read the final hymn aloud. If you are worshiping in person, please follow along silently.)

Prepare for worship: Sit in silence or with soft music for a few moments

Call to Worship:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel v.1

O come, O come, Emanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

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Centering Words:

O Emmanuel, we wait for your coming. May we be faithful servants doing the tasks you have for each of us until your coming again.

Lighting the Advent Candle:

Read Isaiah 60: 2-3

We light this candle as a symbol of Christ our Hope. May the light sent from God shine in the darkness to show us the way of Salvation. O come, O come, Emmanuel.

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Prayer of the Day:

You call us to wait, to watch, to be ready. But we are easily distracted, busily doing other things. We grow drowsy and complacent. Give us wisdom, as we prepare for your coming. Forgive us our foolishness and our impatience. Restore us by your grace. Look upon us with your favor, that we might know your presence. Shape us into vessels of blessing, for we are your children, longing to touch your Spirit. In the name of the Son who taught us to pray:

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The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith: Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Prayer of Illumination:

Open our ears that we may hear and our hearts and minds that we may receive your word O Lord our rock and redeemer.

(After each reading take two to three minutes to reflect upon the meaning of the passage to you today.)

Old Testament Reading Isaiah 64: 1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Epistle Reading 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9
Special Music
Gospel Reading Mark 13: 24-37
Sermon *Being a Faithful Servant*
Hymn

Joy Comes with the Dawn

Refrain: Joy comes with the dawn; joy comes with the morning sun;
 joy springs from the tomb and scatters the night with her song, joy comes with the dawn

1. Weeping may come; weeping may come in the night,
 when dark shadows cloud our sight. (refrain)
2. Sorrow will turn, sorrow will turn into song,
 and God's laughter make us strong. (refrain)
3. We will rejoice, we will rejoice and give praise,
 to the One who brings us grace. (refrain)
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Benediction:

Let us go forth, watching for the day of the Lord's coming by being faithful servants to his will. Amen.

Response:

God Be with You till We Meet Again

God be with you till we meet again;
by his counsels guide, uphold you,
with his sheep securely fold you;
God be with you till we meet again.

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Mark 13: 24-37

This passage is part of the last discourse of Jesus in Mark's Gospel before the passion narrative. Leading up to what we read today, Jesus revealed the destruction of the temple, the persecution of the believers, and the final sacrilege, the seeming final victory of evil.

But then Jesus, the Son of Man, will return. Jesus will return to gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth and to the ends of heaven. Jesus will gather the elect to him. Jesus will have the final victory.

The question that arises from this passage is "Who are the elect?" Some may say that there are those who are chosen by God from the beginning. God has chosen from birth who is going to get in and who is going to be out. This would seem to make our life on earth rather pointless with no room for grace.

Some may say that it is those that suffer on earth. Those who are poor, oppressed and abused will receive their comfort in the next life. They just have to suffer through this one. This seems to foster an attitude of resentment and division. The have nots could say, "I am going to get mine in heaven while rich folks burn in hell." This presents a fantasy, not a reality. This too leaves no room for grace.

Maybe the elect are those extraordinary saints, those exceptional people that do extraordinary things for God's Kingdom. People like all the apostles and saints in the Bible. People like Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Wesley. All the great theologians: Aquinas. Barth, Bonhoeffer. All the great evangelists: Billy Graham. Harry Emerson Fostick, Norman Vincent Peale. All the social activists like Mother Theresa, Jane Adams, Martin Luther King. All of these people did extraordinary things for God's Kingdom. But where does that leave us ordinary people doing ordinary things? Are we out?

We see who the elect is in the parable found in verses 32- 37. Jesus notes that no one knows when the time of the Son of Man's coming will be. He makes the analogy of a man going on a journey. Before he leaves, he charges his servants with certain tasks. Each servant is given a task to do for the continued functioning of the master's household while he is away. The faithful servants are the ones that are working at the task they were assigned when the master returns. The unfaithful servants are asleep and not working at their assigned task. It is those who have endured through persecution. These are the elect that Jesus will gather from the four winds and the ends of the earth.

Well, can we be in the elect since we don't really face any persecution or at least nothing like the early church folk? To me, enduring persecution could also entail enduring temptations, the

large ones such as drugs and sex, but also the smaller ones, like skipping devotional and prayer time. Being a faithful servant involves two major items.

The first is getting the instructions from the master. You cannot perform a task if you do not know what the task is or how to perform the task. We may know that our task is to make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world, but how do we do that? We have to listen to receive the how from the master, God. Individually, we receive instructions from the master, what God wants each one of us to be doing for the Kingdom. Not only will God tell us what we are to do, we will also receive instructions on how to do it.

How do we receive these instructions from God? God doesn't send emails or text messages or call on the phone or send a letter that specifically says something like, "John, I want you to preach. GOD." No God's instructions may come in a little more subtle manner. Remember Elijah and the still small voice.

We receive instructions from God as we intentionally attune ourselves to hear God's voice. We do this through intentional Bible Study. Before you start reading, ask God to reveal what is in the passage that you need to hear that day. Take time to reflect upon the passage and what message is God giving to you through this passage. Use commentaries or study guides or even discuss a passage with the preacher. We attune ourselves to God as we intentionally study God's word.

We attune ourselves to hear God's voice in worship, gathering in-person or on-line to focus upon God as a community. In normal times I would say we hear God's voice as we sing the hymns, recite the creeds and prayers, and partake of the sacraments. Even now we hear God's voice as we listen to the Word and reflect with the music. We attune ourselves to God as we worship together.

We attune ourselves to God in our time of prayer and devotion, by setting aside time each day to focus on God. We go to God in prayer asking for God's direction. Then we listen and meditate to experience God's presence with us.

The more we attune ourselves to God, the more we begin to see and hear God in different ways. We more readily and easily receive God's instructions for us so we can understand the task that God has for each one of us. These are instructions for our lives and for each day of our life.

But being a faithful servant is more than just receiving the master's instructions. A faithful servant carries out the master's instructions even when the master is not present. To pray, to worship, to study the Bible without action is not fulfilling the will of the master. To be a faithful servant we must act in response to what God is telling us. It may be something life changing, like changing careers and going into the ministry, or it may be as simple as sending a card to a

shut-in. We are faithful servants as we receive our instructions from God and then carry out those instructions.

As faithful servants, we work diligently at the task the master has set for us. We continue at the task even though the master is not with us. We work diligently to maintain and increase the master's kingdom for we do not know when the master is coming.

Though this passage is in the context of the second coming of Christ, I believe that it may also be applicable to the coming of death. We do not know when death is coming. We may gain a sense of the nearness of death as we get older or have physical illness. But death may come suddenly and unexpectedly. I remember talking to Mom one Sunday afternoon around 5 p.m. and everybody was fine. At 11 p.m. she was calling to tell us that my brother, Thomas, had died of a heart attack. We all know of people that seemed perfectly healthy but died unexpectedly. We do not know when death may come, so don't we want to be working at the task the master gave us?

Let us be faithful servants. Let us listen to receive the instructions of our divine master. Let us act to carry out those instructions each and every day of our lives. Let us be faithful servants that may be counted among the elect.