

Advent 4, Year B, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's hard to believe  
that its only four days until Christmas.

And when I was a child  
this was the most exciting time of the year.  
Counting down the days on my advent calendar,  
just two more to open before that magical number twenty-four -  
though I never quite worked out  
why we didn't save that for the twenty fifth,  
or why it always got a double door.  
That said,  
the anticipation was wonderful.  
We'd see carolers in the mall  
and our tree would be decorated, more or less,  
cards were written,  
and presents were wrapped for the most part  
and under the tree.  
I loved looking at the shapes  
and shaking them  
to see if I could work out what was inside.

And then it came to Christmas Eve,  
and being Australian  
where Christmas is in the middle of summer  
and there are no chimneys in most houses anyway,  
we hung pillowcases at the foot of our beds  
which Santa  
would hopefully have filled  
with all kinds  
of good things  
by the time we woke up  
on Christmas morning.  
And then there would be church,  
where we would dress up in our best clothes and show one chosen toy  
to our friends,  
and then,  
at least the years when we lived in Sydney where all our relatives were  
there would be a huge Christmas Dinner,

roast turkey, roast pork, and ham, and Christmas pudding to finish up.  
 And often a picnic at the beach in the evening -  
 remember it's summer there -  
 and cricket on the sand.

But as I grew older  
 I began to realize  
 that Christmas wasn't as wonderful for everybody else.  
 Over time  
 the family gatherings grew smaller  
 as one by one  
 our great aunts and uncles and grandparents died.  
 Some years  
 a family disagreement meant that one set of cousins weren't there;  
 some marriages broke up;  
 my generation  
 scattered throughout the country and the world  
 and those classic old time Christmases  
 were no more.

Just this week I was talking with someone who was in tears.  
 Their family had moved away;  
 there had been too many deaths this last year;  
 none of their friends were free to join them.  
 They were going to be alone this Christmas,  
 and it was very difficult.  
 Thankfully I was able to call their priest, who said he'd call by, and would find someone in the  
 parish to invite them for Christmas Day.

But that doesn't disguise many people's experience:  
 Christmas is a wonderful time,  
 as long as your celebration fits  
 the fairytale model;  
 otherwise  
 it can be very hard.

And it's why I'm really glad Psalm eighty-nine was set for today.  
 The verses we read  
 are just a small part  
 of a much longer psalm.  
 And as far as we can tell  
 it's a psalm that dates back  
 to some time after King David's reign.

David's reign  
was a time of great joy for the people of God.  
They'd always wanted a king, so they would be like the people round them,  
but their first one,  
Saul,  
hadn't been so good.  
in fact, he seemed to have gone a bit crazy at the end,  
and so when David was chosen by the prophet Samuel,  
was a hero in battle,  
and proved himself a good leader,  
the people were happy.  
And even more than that,  
through the prophet Samuel,  
great things had been spoken of David.  
We heard apart of those prophecies in our first reading today.  
And not just of David,  
but of the kings who would follow,  
a line of descendants who would continue to rule wisely and well,  
and who God would bless,  
and with them  
the people.

The first part of the psalm,  
some of which we read today,  
is a reminder of those promises,  
a reminder of the faithfulness and love of God,  
and the amazing things God has done for the people.

But then - and here comes the problem -  
things got difficult.  
Not all of David's descendants  
ruled wisely.  
Some of them  
began to forget  
that it was God who had given them their power,  
God's authority  
that had put them in place.  
They began to ignore God,  
and look for other things to worship.  
Other nations began to attack,  
and the kingdom itself split in half.  
They got invaded.  
And people got taken into exile.

It's most likely  
that even if the first half of our psalm  
comes from the time of David's reign,  
the second half  
was written much later  
when everything seemed  
to have fallen apart,  
including  
God's promises.

After all the confidence of the part of the psalm we read,  
listen to what comes later:  
But you have cast off and rejected your anointed;  
you have become enraged at him.  
You have broken your covenant with your servant,  
defiled his crown, and hurled it to the ground.  
You have breached all his walls  
and laid his strongholds in ruins.  
All who pass by despoil him;  
he has become the scorn of his neighbors.  
You have exalted the right hand of his foes  
and made all his enemies rejoice.  
You have turned back the edge of his sword  
and have not sustained him in battle.  
You have put an end to his splendor  
and cast his throne to the ground.  
You have cut short the days of his youth  
and have covered him with shame.

They are words of utter despair.  
You promised so much, God!  
How can you have failed us?

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Our psalm began  
with remembering,  
remembering  
the goodness  
and the promises of God  
to King David and his descendants,  
to the whole

people of God.

Then we heard the despair of people  
looking at God's promises  
and seeing  
to have utterly failed.

Now we turn back to remembering.  
But this time  
instead of the people remembering the promises of God,  
it's a call  
to God to remember.

Remember your promises.  
Remember your people.  
Remember.

And then, unexpectedly  
the psalm ends.  
One moment,  
the psalmist is struggling, calling on God  
not to forget  
the pain of his people.  
Then next  
we have a statement of utter confidence.

“Blessed be the Lord for evermore! Amen, I say, Amen.”

Something has happened  
between all the pain  
and that final verse.

And I suspect  
we only find the answer  
if we go back to the beginning of the psalm again.  
Go back to the beginning  
and remind ourselves  
of the faithfulness  
of God.

Your love, O Lord, for ever will I sing;  
from age to age my mouth will proclaim your faithfulness.  
For I am persuaded that your love is established for ever;

you have set your faithfulness firmly in the heavens.  
“I have made a covenant with my chosen one;  
I have sworn an oath to David my servant:  
‘I will establish your line for ever,  
and preserve your throne for all generations.’”

Because it’s that beginning  
that points us forward  
not to the original promise  
fulfilled in David,  
but to the story we heard today in our gospel  
when an angel came to a young girl in Nazareth,  
engaged to be married  
to a man descended  
from King David.  
Mary, and Joseph.

The angel came to tell Mary  
that she would have a son,  
not just any baby,  
but the fulfillment  
of all God’s promises.  
Son of the Most High, the throne of David,  
a kingdom without end.  
Son of God.  
God with us.

And so  
we’re back where we began.

It’s four days  
until Christmas,  
the time when we celebrate  
the birth of that child.

And some of us, some of us  
want so much to celebrate  
but are stuck somewhere  
in the second half of the psalm.

You promised so much, God!  
How can you have failed us?

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At some churches at this time of year  
they hold what is called  
a Blue Christmas service.  
It's a way of acknowledging  
that Christmas is not always  
an easy time.  
Sometimes  
in the middle of all the joy  
and excitement  
and expectation  
we struggle.

And sometimes, sometimes  
we need permission  
to say that.  
If not to one another,  
at least to God.

And then to hear God  
speaking to us  
as we go back  
to the story again,  
the story  
of a tiny baby,  
born in a stable,  
wrapped in swaddling clothes  
and lying in a manger.  
And all the promises of God  
wrapped up in him,  
God's own Son,  
God with us.

Remember those words  
from the first chapter of the gospel according to John?  
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in  
the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing  
came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all  
people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The light of Christ  
shining in the darkness

welcoming us  
into the presence  
of God.