

Sermon for Sunday, December 3, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today is one of those Sundays when everything
is all muddled up together.

It's the first Sunday of Advent,
the first Sunday of the church's year
and the first of four weeks of anticipation
of the birth of Jesus Christ.

A beginning.

It's also the beginning of something else new,
of the Christian life of little Phineas,
as he is baptized into Christ's body,
as he becomes a member
of the church.

Another beginning.

And there is an ending,
as after almost eleven years
I come to the conclusion of my time as your rector
here at St James.

Beginnings and endings, looking backward and looking forward,
all muddled up together in one service.

At first I wondered
how on earth to make sense of all of this,
whether these endings and beginnings
could ever have anything to do with one another.

But then it struck me
that Advent,
this season that we are starting today,
is about exactly that.

It is about looking backward
and looking forward;
it is about beginnings
and about endings.

In Advent,
we look back to the time before Jesus was born,
that time of waiting for a Messiah
who had been promised to the people,
promised by the prophets, as we will hear
 in our readings from Isaiah in the coming weeks
promised by the angel
to Mary and Joseph.
In Advent we look back
to a looking forward
to the promised one of God.

Those of you who have waited for a child to be born
know what that looking forward is like. You can look back
and remember
the looking forward.
It's that peculiar mixture of joy and dread and hope,
the uncertainty that even today all our medical expertise
can't quite take away;
birth is a time of tremendous uncertainty,
and it's a huge relief when it's over and the baby is safely in his or her parents' arms.

Advent is like that.
We wait for the coming of the baby,
and even though we know the end of the story,
even though we know
that the angel has it right,
that Mary and Joseph
will get to hold a newborn child safe in their arms,
that the shepherds and angels and wise men
will glorify God together,
still we wait,
wait for this child
who will be Emmanuel,
God
with us.

And like anyone waiting for the birth of a child,

we're not quite sure what this birth will mean
not quite sure how God-with-us
will play out in our lives.

But we do know
that there is a promise here, there is hope,
and so we wait.

Advent
is about looking back.

But it's also about looking forward.
Because the other great theme of Advent
is looking forward
to the coming again
of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
It's that coming that is the focus of our gospel reading today,
a reading that is kind of alarming.
Because this side of Advent is about waiting too,
but this time, instead of the anticipation and excitement of waiting for a baby,
we are waiting for the coming, the second coming
of a Messiah who will come
to rule and judge this world of ours.
This waiting
is full of anxiety and uncertainty and dread,
or at least, that's how it feels,
when the waiting is accompanied by a darkened sun
and a silent moon,
falling stars
and a quaking heaven.

But in some ways
this waiting
is no different from the other.
Because we're waiting for the same Messiah, the same Jesus Christ, the same God-with-us,
and if Jesus is to be believed,
then if we stay alert, if we pay attention,
then we will come face to face with Jesus as ruler and judge
with as much confidence as we come to Jesus the God-with-us.

The beginning, the first Advent, which we look back to,
and the end, the second Advent, which we look forward to
are not so far apart.

Because both are signs
of God's grace.

God reaches out to us, in Christ the baby in Bethlehem,
and in Christ the ruler and judge of all,
God reaches out to us,
and invites us to follow.

And in preparing for the first advent
and preparing for the second advent,
we're called to the same thing,
to be people of faith.

That's the reminder
of our second lesson, the words of encouragement
from the apostle Paul, and his co-worker, Sosthenes,
to the members of the church in Corinth.

It's a letter that begins this way:

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother
Sosthenes,

“To the church of God that is in Corinth,
to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus,
called to be saints, together with all those who in every place
call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
both their Lord and ours.”

Called to be saints.

Sainthood

perhaps wasn't the first thing
that came to mind

when Paul and the other leaders of the early church
thought of the Christians in Corinth.

If you read on in Paul's letter,
you'll discover

that the Corinthians
had a few issues.

They were a little competitive,
arguing about who

had the best Christian pedigree,
that is, who had been baptized
by the most significant of the early church leaders.
Some of them, the ones most confident in their faith,
considered themselves superior
to other members of their church
who were a little more uncertain.
They had issues around sharing -
pot lucks weren't so much pot lucks
as people hoarding their own food
to share with
their "friends".
All in all,
perhaps not a group
that you would immediately think of
as saints.

But they were saints,
not because of how they behaved,
but because of who had called them together.
What made them saints, or literally in the greek, holy
was that they had been called by God,
called by God and by God's grace
blessed with faith.

And that grace, that faith
given by God through Jesus Christ
provided them with everything that they would need -
everything! -
to continue to be the church in that place.
because God is faithful.

No matter what they are going through,
no matter what they are feeling,
God is faithful.

God will enrich them,
God will strengthen them
so that they can continue to live out their lives of faith,
because God is faithful.

What a wonderful summary
of the Gospel.
God is faithful.

And it's as true today
as it was then.
God is still
faithful.

We live in the time between that first coming of Jesus in Bethlehem
and his second coming
at the end of time.
Advent reminds us
that we live our whole lives
suspended
between looking backward and looking forward,
between beginning and ending,
and all that time
God is faithful.

And we too have been called to be saints.
Some years ago, the vestry and I went through a process of discerning where God was
calling our parish.
You all know what resulted - its printed on the front of our bulletin every week.
to grow in faith through Scripture and prayer.
To build relationships in Christ.
To serve one another and the world.
And as we have done those things, we have experienced God's grace and faithfulness.
As little Phineas will too, as he begins that journey of faith.

Today
is a time of ending
and a time of beginning.
It's a time of looking backwards
and a time of looking forwards.
But the call is the same,
to be the saints of God.
And so I pray for you all
with the same confidence that Paul and Sosthenes had

about the people of Corinth,
I pray for you, and I give thanks for you,
because God is present here
and will strengthen and bless you
as you continue to live in the grace of Christ.
And God will be faithful,
as God has always been
in this place,
God will
to be faithful.