

Old Testament Lesson—Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

New Testament Lesson—Luke 1:68-79

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Here we go again, my friends. Here we are. Another year coming soon to a close; another season of expectation before us; another journey of preparation ahead of us. Finally, we've arrived. Arise, and shine, for your light is coming! Advent is here!

Many of us have been waiting for this forever, it seems. After all, it's the most wonderful time of the year! Or, so I've been told.

Although Advent means “coming,” it's really a time of waiting—a time of anticipation. We wait with a kind of eager hopefulness for the promises of God to be fulfilled.

And I want to be crystal clear about this. These four weeks leading up to Christmas aren't just about proclaiming a promise kept thousands of years ago—not just about celebrating a singular miracle that happened in another part of the world in the distant past.

No, the Advent season is also about *today*—about *this* day and age. Yes, Advent is also about expecting God to show up. We don't just wait hopefully for the Lord, we wait confidently for the Lord.

And maybe most importantly...this holy season is about expecting God to act and intervene in the here and now. It's about God keeping God's promises to us *today*—to *this* generation. It's about the power of Christ's birth experienced throughout Creation *now*—for such a time as this.

Think about it, friends. If the miracle of Christmas is only relevant for ancient peoples—if it has no discernible effect—no practical bearing on us and our lives today—in *this* century—for these extraordinary times, well...then it might as well have never happened.

The miracle of Christmas—of God becoming a human being—must have meaning for us in the present—at the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025. It must impact our hearts enough—must compel the Church to rediscover its original hope and convictions.

God arriving in the flesh—being born among us—has to mean something profound to us right now. It has to influence the way we live and what we believe: that, goodness is stronger than evil, for example—that light is stronger than darkness.

Otherwise: What are we doing here? What's the point of all this?

Friends: This isn't some remembrance celebration like many of our civil holidays. This is about bearing witness to the holy in our midst *today*. This is about noticing God's presence where we are and when we are; about seeing the face of Christ in our neighbors.

It's about acknowledging the modern-day miracles being birthed all around us. And I'm telling you. They're everywhere!

Here's the truth: there is always good news for those with ears to hear it. There's always evidence of God's handiwork for those looking for it. Even in the most hopeless and cynical of times, Christ will always open the door to those who knock.

And so we wait. We wait for the promises of God to be fulfilled—for us—today—within these present circumstances.

But please—I really need you to hear me, siblings in Christ. Waiting with hope and expectation is not the same as sitting idly by. Make no mistake. We are not called to do nothing. Scripture is clear that God works *through us*. God works *wonders* through us, in fact!

Preparing for the birth of Jesus means taking up our calling with boldness. We prepare by understanding our responsibility as the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

Friends: I know there's a lot of understandable anxiety about the state of the world right now. It feels like an endless barrage of bad news. I get it. And I'm with you. It very much feels that way to me, too.

I'll admit: Some days I think to myself...If I hear about another war or missile strike or broken ceasefire I'm going to scream. If I hear about another politician or corporation (once again) putting profits and power over peoples' lives, I'm going to lose it.

And once I've lost it and start screaming, all of a sudden I'm pointing fingers and blaming others and (at that point) there's nothing constructive I can possibly offer (much less the good news of the gospel). I'm sure some of you here can relate.

The question before us this morning is how do we embody peace today? How do we become a soothing balm for a world in pain? How can we make it real—something attainable and more than just an elusive ideal or fantasy? I'm asking in earnest: Is lasting peace anything more than naivete?

I think the only way to answer those questions is by looking at the evidence found in God's word to us. As we heard earlier in worship, the story of Christ's birth is clear about God's plan for us: Peace on earth and goodwill toward our neighbors. An attainable peace that lasts is our Creator's intention for Creation. That is what God wants and wills. No doubt about it.

Christ himself teaches us that God not only equips, but blesses those who sincerely and passionately work to bring peace.

It may seem strange and even counterintuitive, but as sure I'm standing here, the example I encounter in Scripture is one of confrontation. That is to say, the way we embody peace

today—the way to make peace a reality in the frustrating world we live in is through confrontation.

And no, I'm not talking about violence. I'm not talking about belittling our opponents or humiliating our enemies. I don't mean bullying others with the truth and shoving it down their throats.

No, I mean the Church today is called to confront the barrage of bad news with the victorious good news of the gospel—the good news announced to Mary, and Joseph and Elizabeth and Zechariah and lowly shepherds and magi from the East.

Hear that good news again as it burst forth from John the Baptist's father, Zechariah. Luke tell us that Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaimed that *the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Now that doesn't sound like a fantasy to me. It sounds like a promise—like a prophecy—one the Church believes to be fulfilled in the coming of the Christ-child—one that continues to be realized and confirmed in the ministries of Christ's followers today.

Living into Christ's countercultural example means boldly confronting the bad news with the good news—confronting terror and death and hopelessness with the gospel of Jesus the Messiah and Savior of the World—the One who was, and is, and is to come.

I'm reminded of the conditions into which Jesus was born. Do you remember the state of the world in Jesus' day? A humble carpenter's son, born under brutal Roman occupation, ruled by a king so obsessed with power as to shrug his shoulders at infanticide... A humble carpenter's son, whose holy Temple was ransacked and desecrated by the Greeks just a couple centuries earlier—whose holy Temple would be utterly destroyed just a few decades after his death...

My point is this, my friends: No matter how bad (even hellish) things feel, my friends, the gospel says Christ descended into hell. He's been there at the edge of the abyss—with us—and always will be.

You see: The Christmas story doesn't guarantee peace as an inevitability. It does, however, assure us that nothing will be impossible with God, especially peace on earth.

We *can* manifest the peace we desire and that God intends. We do so every time we confront the evils and sinful structures of this world with the Light of Christ. We do so every time we confront the firehose of bad news with the tidal wave of gospel Truth.

As sure as we know the tomb's still empty, we also know that manger will be filled with the One who makes peace an achievable reality in our day and time.

So don't give up. Please don't give up. The Prince of Peace is coming. The kingdom of God is near.

So lay down your burdens. Lay down your arms. Lay down your grudges.

But take up your ministries with courage; and believe that peace is possible.

Amen.