

WELCOME 2 December 2018 – 1 Advent '18 C

Isaiah 9:2-7 & Luke 21:25-36

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! It is great to have you here. Please stay with us for morning tea after worship...

Christmas...it's the most wonderful time of the year. Right? Song says so! Really?

Our serene expectations of peace and joy, of family gathered & happiness shared are not always matched by the reality of this season with its bustling activity, stress, expense and impatience...and...

Take all those personalities & jam them under one roof...around one table...Life is messy, even when it's dressed in tinsel, gorged with food & especially lubricated by the favoured beverages. Sometimes it's a mess...

But this is the world, in all its mess, that God loves & sent his son to redeem/save.

We'll explore & experience that this week...and throughout the Advent & Christmas seasons...because when it comes to Christmas, we all come with expectations, & sometimes those expectations aren't met the way that we hope & even get...well...messy. But the Wonderful Counselor helps us to acknowledge & own up to the mess that exists in this messy world & in our own lives. Christmas mess...our Saviour came & still comes to this messy world.

Let's pray...

PRAYER OF THE DAY

"Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down!

How the mountains would quake in your presence!

As fire causes wood to burn and water to boil,

your coming would make the nations tremble.

Then your enemies would learn the reason for your fame!...

For since the world began, no ear has heard and no eye has seen a God like you, who works for those who wait for him!" – Is 64:1-4

O Wisdom of our God Most High, guiding creation with power and love: come to teach us the path of knowledge & lead us in the will & work of the Father. Through Jesus Christ...Amen.

1 ADVENT '18 C – CHRISMASMESS: WONDERFUL COUNSELLOR

FAITH CHAT:

1. Favourite Christmas “thing.” Song? Food? Memory? Thing to do?
2. Have your Christmas plans ever been...messed up? How? What did you do?

Since we've moved, I've enjoyed meeting some of our new neighbours...don't know any of them well yet but it's fun to be in our “new” place & slowly but surely make it more us. Part of that is getting to know the folks around us...1 family really surprised me. I was mowing the yard & they were getting out of their car & we smiled waved & I shut down the mower & walked over to introduce myself. It's what I do. They just got home from a shopping trip & had bought a Hot Wheels Advent Calendar for their son! Didn't know those existed...As a kid I loved Hot Wheels...& we talked about that. We didn't go into a whole lot of detail about the calendar, but my guess is the toy maker doesn't have all the little cars show up in Bethlehem to welcome baby Jesus...Their idea of Advent & mine are probably a bit different.

That's not too unusual...just ask any member of our family when's the best time to open Christmas presents...you might have had those conversations too...I get it. Most of us didn't have too much trouble thinking of a time when our Christmas plans got messed up...Maybe a little...maybe a lot...but C-mas & plans are words often best not used in the same sentence. I shared with a friend the other day my childhood C-mas memory of my parents...They had about 1 good argument every year: C-mas tree. We always had a cut/live tree until I was about 13-14. Trees *NEVER* stood up straight. Always cockeyed. My dad was spatially disabled & my mom is obsessive-compulsive. They squabbled big time once a year trying to get the blessed tree straight. Cut a bit. Sand some. Cut some more. Trim here. Shim up under here....crooked. **BIBLES**

So when I turn to the last chapters of Luke's biography of Jesus...gospel...I find a certain familiarity in this wild & seemingly threatening sermon from Jesus...Jesus tells us what we already know: things in our world don't always go right. There are things that happen that are destructive, unpredictable, painful, flat scare the pants off us. Stuff happens that is confusing or leaves us knocked off our feet. We look at the road ahead & we're pretty sure there's no road & all the bridges are washed out. That was true in Luke's day, & it's just as true now. We are a broken world, & that means that there are hard times & crippling seasons. Try as we might to avoid it, things happen that are painful & wrong & unfair & unfathomable. Things happen that change the whole course of life & we didn't sign up for that.

Isaiah says it straight up...people walk in darkness. Isaiah begins with this simple statement of fact. The world is blanketed in darkness. Not just any old darkness, Isaiah says people live in a land of *deep* darkness. Some translations say, “*a land consumed by the shadow of death.*” Now we're talking. Death overshadows this world. It did back then. It does right now/today. Even the best things in life don't last forever. People die, good people, people we love, people who are too young & have lots to live for. Beauty fades. Peace is fragile. Health diminishes. Pleasure is fleeting.

You know those rare moments when everything in your life seems to be humming on all cylinders? What happens to those moments? They disappear, just like that. I don't dwell on this sort of stuff every day, but I do understand that so many good things in my life/in life will...in time...be gone. When Isaiah says people walk in the darkness of the shadow of death, he's talking about me/you/us. I don't have to like it. I just know it's true.....

And I can create a great theological rationale for that...I can talk at length about free will & sin & God's justice & the existence of evil. I went to seminary a long time to be able to have that conversation & say really amazing stuff like “*darkness exists in this world as a direct result of human sin & rebellion against God.*” But who wants to hear that over in palliative care? Who wants to hear that when someone just for kicks lit a fire that burned a few hundred hectares of your paddocks & a few dozen of your sheep & your house...or got behind the wheel of their car after a snoot full of drinks at the races & ran over...

It's true “*darkness exists in this world as a direct result of human sin & rebellion against God.*” But that does nothing to lift the weight of darkness that crushes even the most vibrant of spirits...I told a friend of mine the other day that I felt really old... that had nothing to do with chronology & everything to do with how dark the world felt at that moment...how much darkness had collapsed in on us.

Guilt, shame, failure, addiction, chronic illness, persistent physical pain feel heavy like this. So do grief or despair...loneliness. The darkness, in whatever form it comes, always weighs heavy on our lives. All the explanations in the world, the good ones & the well-meaning misguided ones, true as they may be, don't seem to ever lighten the load.

But notice well how Isaiah says the darkness is...addressed. Just watch... Remember Isaiah is speaking to God's people who are about to be destroyed militarily & nationally & spiritually...They have rebelled against God & done everything he told them would lead to their destruction & Assyria is coming to conquer them like they have never imagined. The whole nation will be gone... armies slaughtered...cities reduced to rubble...people captured exiled killed absorbed & scattered such that they become non-people...national existence is obliterated. *Is 8:20-22 - Look to God's instructions & teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark. They will go from one place to another, weary & hungry. Because they are hungry, they will rage & curse their king & their God. They will look up to heaven & down at the earth, but wherever they look, there will be trouble & anguish & dark despair. They will be thrown out into the darkness.* Cheery stuff right? But Chap 9 begins:

Nevertheless, that time of darkness & despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun & Naphtali will be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan & the sea, will be filled with glory. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine. You see it...God intention for us is not darkness, despair, separation from him...In their annihilation God has not forgotten his love for them. In the abyss God steps in to rescue & redeem & restore. Darkness does not get the last word. The road to glory runs through the valley of the shadow of death in the hands of God.

How is that heaviness lifted? That burden raised? That darkness dispelled by light? That yoke broken so we can be free? *"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. He will be called: Wonderful Counselor..."* You see... God doesn't just stand back & watch, God immerses himself in our existence. God comes to share our vulnerability, to endure betrayal, to take on our suffering to live our pain & to die our death. Our mess? He wears it. This child for us is *Wonderful Counsellor*...His wisdom & insight are unsearchable...^{w/o} compare & ^{w/o} limit. He sees what makes us afraid. He knows what keeps us awake at night. He comprehends our frailty & failings & fakery. He holds us in our loneliness & embraces us in our sorrow. He takes our hand to lead us through the darkest hour.

He is Wonderful because all that he does in love. Hebrew word for *wonderful* is "*pela*" which actually means *wonder* or *miracle*. So the "*wonderful*" doesn't just mean *delightful & pleasing* but also *miraculous*. But he is Counsellor because he always declares what is real... that we are sinful & broken beyond comprehension but loved by God beyond our wildest dreams. That we have nothing to offer but our mess...but that is exactly what God wants so he can make it beautiful. He reveals what is & leads us toward what we will be in his presence. He retrieves us from our lostness & leads us home to the Father.

Jesus tells us what we already know: things in our world don't always go right. We get clobbered by stuff that's destructive, unpredictable, painful, flat scare the pants off us. We get bowled over by stuff that is confusing/leaves us knocked off our feet We look at the road ahead & we're pretty sure there's no road & all the bridges are washed out. But right there in the midst of the fear & the tears & the agonizing & the wars & the poverty & the hatred & the bombs & disease & death, Jesus calls to us, *"stand up & raise your heads, because your salvation is near!"* While everyone else is frozen in fear & dread, Jesus says *"when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."*

Check out the fig tree Jesus says...just like the leaves tell you something's happening...the signs in our world that hit you like a runaway bull are there to remind us that when we are at our weakest – worst – worn-out – don't duck & cover – don't crawl under your bed – don't give up quit go off doing something ridiculous. Stand up & look up...raise your eyes & see for God is closer in the chaos than you could imagine – God is nearer in the mess than in your most clean & controlled moments...When you are convinced you've been left to rot in bedlam, God has a hold of you tighter than ever & has his glory in your future...has his kingdom as your destiny...has his arms as your refuge & strength.

Let's pray with that in mind...

Lord Jesus Christ, we await your coming.

We wait filled with hope knowing your light will shine in the darkness.

We wait anticipating your peace, believing that one day it will fill our world.

We wait trusting your will and wisdom in all things, confident that you make all things work for good for those who are called according to your purpose.

We wait embraced in your love.

Lead us to share it with our neighbours.

We pray in your Name...Amen