

Sermon161211
St. Stephen's, Seattle - Advent 3(A)
Lucas Mix

The Collect

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
 like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.
 The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
 They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.
 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.
 He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.
 He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
 For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;
 the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;
 the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people;
 no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
 they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.
 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing;
 everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
 they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Psalm 146:4-9 (St. Helena's Psalter)

Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help,
 whose hope is in their God;
 Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them;
 whose promise abides for ever;
 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed
 and food to those who hunger.
 God sets the prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind;
 God lifts up those who are bowed down;
 The Most High loves the righteous; the Most High cares for the stranger;
 God sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked.
 God shall reign for ever, your God, O Zion, throughout all generations. Alleluia!

James 5:7-10

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way before you.'

"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Sermon

For what do we wait?

It's all fine and good to speak of the end times, of peace and justice for all,

but how does that relate to today?

What are we to do while we wait?

And what are we to do when the time comes?

Critics of Christianity have been quick to point out how vague scriptures can be

when it comes to prophesy

and yet strangely – perhaps arbitrarily specific –

when it comes to morals.

And this is not entirely unfair,

for we are told both that the end is near

“the kingdom of Heaven has come near” (Mk 1:15)

“this generation will not pass away

until all these things have taken place.” (Mt 24:34)

and that we must wait

“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord” (Ja 5:7)

Indeed, many Christians have asked,

why the Lord waits so long to return.

I cannot give you *the* answer.

All of us must bring our heart and mind to God.

But I can give you one key to these passages

from my own experience.

We hear again and again the story of the farmer.

My favorite version comes from Mark's gospel (4:26-29):

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is as if

someone would scatter seed on the ground,

and would sleep and rise night and day,

and the seed would sprout and grow,

he does not know how.

The earth produces of itself,

first the stalk, then the head,

then the full grain in the head.

But when the grain is ripe,

at once he goes in with his sickle,

because the harvest has come.’

I don't know about you, but this never sounded immediate to me.

I think of gardening as a hobby.

I am separated from the earth,
and from the growing of plants
by industry and markets and travel.

This is not so for the farmer.

He sows and waters so that he may eat.

He is dependent on the mystery
of seed that is buried and rises.

He waits for the wheat,
so that he may eat,
so that his family may live.

It is not a mystery in the sense of an academic puzzle,
or a religious ritual,
or a curiosity.

It is something profoundly important,
necessary for daily life,
that occurs hidden from our eyes,
guided by rules we do not fully comprehend.

Do not misunderstand me;

I would never invoke mystery to stop someone from asking questions.

We fight to understand, as we fight to live.

Meanwhile, we recognize our profound dependence
on plants and animals that grow
in wondrous and awe-filled ways
that continue to surprise us.

Every gardener knows this.

Every parent knows this.

As much as we seek, there is always more to learn
about life and growth.

It requires patience, and yet, it also requires tending.

We must plant and water and weed and prune.

The Kingdom of Heaven is no less mysterious,
and no less important
in the life of the world
and in our daily lives.

It is no less a matter of life and death
than childbirth – another common image in the Bible.

In Romans (8:22), Paul says:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;
and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

So the mysterious now and not yet
 is not an uncertainty.
 Though we do not know how things will turn out,
 we do know something is growing within us.
 So with the farmer we wait for the food we need,
 and with the mother, we wait for the child to come,
 knowing that we cannot know
 how long we will wait,
 or exactly what the outcome will be.
 And we are actively waiting,
 doing all we can to encourage new life.
 Those are the rules we follow,
 and that is the hope we bear.

So, yes, we have been told to plant the seeds of love and truth,
 to spread word of Jesus Christ and the coming kingdom,
 to do justice and mercy,
 to foster forgiveness and community and faith.
 We do these things not because they bear fruit immediately.
 They seldom do.
 We do them because they will hide in the ground,
 growing in people's hearts,
 as the new kingdom comes to fruition.
 Though we rarely harvest the seeds we ourselves have planted,
 we find the fruits of the Holy Spirit
 everywhere we go.
 We live on love and truth, justice and mercy,
 on the strength, forgiveness and faith of others.
 Those gifts came from seeds planted long ago,
 by other farmers.
 And, though they grew in the dark,
 their product was sure –
 the light and the life of the world.

Never forget that justice and mercy are daily bread
 to the people of the world.
 Never forget that love and truth are needed for the world to grow.
 You have a part in that harvest.
 You have a part in planting the seeds,
 in tending and watering and weeding.
 And, when the time comes, you must reach out and grasp the truth,
 offered from the lips of friends –
 and enemies.
 We all live by eating that wheat, that bread.

The mystery of this table is many things,
 but we must not pretend it is secret or obscure or convoluted.
 It is Christ's body made flesh.
 It is the seed that was buried and rose from the earth to feed the world.
 It is life and death and community and faith,
 present in a the most common aspect of our lives –
 eating.

Every time you talk to another human,
 you plant seeds of one kind or another.
 Every action affects the harvest – though often we do not know how.
 Have patience and pay attention.
 I promise you that the seed planted in Jesus Christ is bearing fruit.

Christian morals are not arbitrary –
 though many Christians have tried to make them so.
 Nor should we pretend we fully understand them –
 life and growth are tricky.
 Still, the general rules are simple.
 Listen for and talk to God.
 All things come from God, who cares for all.
 Rest from your labors once a week.
 Really. I know our society frowns on it.
 Forget work and entertainment and simply
 reflect on the life of the world
 what is growing inside you
 and inside those you love.
 Forgive and pray for everyone, including your enemies.
 Only God knows what grows inside of them.
 Honor the parents and peacemakers,
 community builders and teachers,
 those who have their eyes on hope.
 And remember that you do not live for yourself alone,
 but for the light of the world,
 growing inside you.

Mary, the God Bearer, the mother of Jesus,
 has a prominent place in the Christian tradition,
 because she models this for us.
 She models patience and peace, listening and caring.
 Nor was she a passive bystander.

I admit, I have not always appreciated the work of Mary.
 I tried too hard.
 I tried to make the story more complicated than it is.
 She went through labor,
 she bore Christ within her body,
 never understanding the how or why of her condition,
 never comprehending the full importance
 of her labor for the world.
 She raised Jesus and taught him,
 and surrendered him to the world.

What is the Kingdom of Heaven?
 It is a place where we all may be our fullest selves –
 alone and together.
 It is a time when God remedies injustice immediately –
 and love alone moves us.
 It is a condition of blessedness and community,
 when the labor is over,
 and we meet the children of our hearts,
 the fruits of the Spirit of Christ,
 that have been growing all this time.

All will be fed.
 And all will be satisfied.
 And all will behold the face of God.

In the meantime, we wait with patience.
 Not the patience of the bored,
 but the patience of the hungry farmer,
 the curious gardener,
 and the expectant mother.
 We attend to the mysteries of faith,
 the planted wheat and the harvest.
 We look for the fruit of the Spirit:
 “love, joy, peace,
 patience, kindness, generosity,
 faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22)
 Whenever we find these gifts,
 we give thanks, enjoy,
 and re-plant the seeds that make them grow.
 Whenever we find them growing within us,
 we give thanks and nurture the life that is to come.

It is a wondrous and awe-filled life
 we remember at Christmas.
This world is coming to an end,
 as a new world comes to light.
There will be grief and sorrow,
 but all these pains are only the first signs
 of something greater than we can ask or imagine,
 the new life of Christ Jesus.