Advent 1 December 2, 2018

All Saints’ Church Year C

Jeremiah 33:14-16 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Psalm 25:1-9 Luke 21: 25-36

To you O Lord, we lift up our souls and put our trust in you. Amen

Just this week, I met Gretchen Rae, our Project Coordinator, in the parking lot of the church. And my first question to her, maybe even before greeting her with a “good morning,” was, “Why do you think the water isn’t running anymore on the street in front of the church?”

“I was going to ask you the same question- no idea.”

“Well, maybe, it’s because I’ve been praying for it to stop.” We both laughed.

Yet, I’m not kidding. Science does have a role here- my guess is that the ground level is not as saturated and is able to absorb the waters coming off the hill more efficiently. Thank God. Yes, I’ve been praying that the water would dry up, that the ice would melt, that no one would get hurt, that it would stop raining. Send the rain to California, dear Lord, where it’s needed, or to South Africa. Help Tere to McGyver our “bridge” over the water flow. And the list goes on.

In the midst of our apocalyptic doom and gloom gospel passage this morning, Jesus is telling us to hold firm. When life is in total chaos, when we feel out of control, fainting from foreboding of what is to come, when our leaders are in distress, torn up by conflict, when mothers are being tear gassed at borders, when too many children are dying from bombs and starvation, when too many tent cities are being constructed, when there are too many signs pointing to injustice, abuse, and roaring seas of betrayal, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down… be alert at all times, praying that you may have strength.”

In other words, pray your life.

I hate admitting this, but I often forget to pray. I begin to obsess, wring my hands, become overwhelmed, get anxious, sometimes moody or I become disengaged, and then I remember. Oh yes, I need to pray. I need to stop worrying. I need to breathe. I need to trust. I need to connect with the Source of all Life and Love. I need to give over. The reason I have any kind of prayer practice and discipline, is because without one, I would get lost in my own feeble solutions. Even with my morning ritual of prayer, I forget.

Jesus is reminding us this morning, through sharp details, why we need to be centered with him. Why we need to pray. It’s really the only way to be sane. Don’t forget to pray. And when you do forget, just remember again. It’s ok. God is waiting.

I was reminded this week by my good friend and priest the Rev. Cathy George the power of prayers that come from children. She like me has kept a bag, and in that bag are slips of prayers made by children over the years. They are so delightful. So real. So simple, yet profound. [Included in an article written by Cathy George (2018): “Poverty of Spirit and the Spiritual Life of Children,” The Yale ISM Review: Vol, 4: No. 2, Article 3].

Here are a few:

Dear God, I kicked the ball in the wrong goal and all my friends are mad at me. Can you help me?

Dear God, My Grampa is sort of mean, will you please make him nicer?

Dear God, I hope that I am one of the chips in your chocolate chip cookie.

Dear God, My best friend’s Mom had to go to a hospital kind of place for awhile, please take care of my friend while her Mom gets better.

Dear God, Can you just not let my parents find out this one time?

Dear God, Dad was sad last night, and I am worried about him. Please make him happy again.

Dear God, Please help me remember everything when it is time to take the test.

Their prayers are simple requests or questions, all yearning to know more about God:

Dear God, Are you really invisible or is that just a trick?

Dear God, In Sunday School they told us what you do. Who does it when you are on vacation?

Dear God, Do animals use you or is there someone else for them?

Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but really I prayed for a puppy. Do you make mistakes?

Dear God, Please send me a pony, I never asked for anything else. You can look it up.

Dear God, Could you please send Dennis Clark to a different camp this year.

Dear God, If you watch in church on Sunday, I’ll show you my new shoes.

Dear God, Are you like the step ladder I use to put the angel on the top of the Christmas tree?

I was at the monastery this week, having a day of spiritual renewal, and was reminded by the monks that an Advent discipline is recommended for this church season not for the discipline part and not for the penitence part, but rather for the freedom part. An Advent discipline is the way to authenticity and joy. That a posture of prayer is designed to begin where you are- with your true self. And that’s where your freedom resides.

That’s what’s so refreshing about children’s prayers. They just pray their lives. They don’t judge their requests; they don’t shy away from the impossible; they see a need and name it as honestly as they can. They trust their lives to God’s presence and fidelity.

Advent is a time to be stirred up, to find joy, to anticipate new birth, to look for presents hidden under the tree of life. If you find that you are bored with your prayers, start all over. Take your lead from the children. Pray as you can and do not try to pray as you can’t. Take yourself as you find yourself and start from that (Dom John Chapman).

And if words don’t do it for you, try something new. If you haven’t come to Community Supper, come and sit down at a table with people you have never met before. Volunteer at the Serendipity Shop. Take a walk in the woods. Come to Sandi’s morning prayer or compline Advent Bible study which is based in an African tradition. Write a letter to the children at Centro Victoria in Juarez. I’m sure Patty or Heidi will translate it for you. When you’re stuck in traffic, sing one of your favorite hymns.

And trust: you are where you are, and when you are thinking of others, or of God, or of how to be kind or patient, however that may be, you are praying. Believe that you can’t fall off the path. Never see yourself as unworthy.

This week I had a long conversation with a parishioner who has been struggling with one catastrophe after another, wondering how she’s going to get through it all, especially during this season of joy and light which feels more like salt on the wound then any kind of solace. Her grandchild, thank God, came through with some sound advice. She said I could share this advice with all of you this morning:

“Grammy, think like I do. There are thousands and thousands of people waiting for God. You’re in line, just like everyone else, and God is going to get to you. You just have to wait your turn. Be patient. God is coming. But don’t give up. Don’t get out of line. That would be stupid, cause if you give up, you get out of line, and then you just have to line up at the end and start all over again. Wait, God is coming. He could be just around the corner. He’s coming.”

Welcome to Advent, our season of waiting, of hesitancy, of joy, of trusting in all the things we don’t possess, of being stirred up, of seeing anew, of being delighted and surprised. Begin where you are. God is there. The world is waiting ***for you*** and ***with you***, as we all live in anticipation and joy of the precious birth of the baby Jesus.

He’s coming. AMEN