

Holy Trinity Sunningdale
Sunday, December 19, 2021
4th Sunday of Advent - Preparation
Readings – Isaiah 40:1-5 & Luke 3:1-9

Does your pulse go up or your heart skip a beat when you hear that you have just 6 days to buy your gifts, wrap them, finish decorating, shop for food and drinks, finalize any travel plans? Christmas is round the corner and despite the threats of the pandemic to cancel it, Christmas is already in full swing. Decorations are up, TV specials are on, and shops are packed. But, there is a question that must be asked, “As we are preparing for Christmas, how are we preparing for Jesus?”

So, how should we prepare for Christmas and prepare for Jesus? My answer is in the image on the screen - a lion and a lamb lying down together.

Our Old Testament reading this morning from the book of Isaiah foretells the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus. Let me give some background to the prophecy. The Israelites were about to go into captivity. In Babylon, they experienced the Lord’s discipline under the oppression of the Babylonians. To the Jews, their situation seemed completely hopeless as they looked at how powerful and strong Babylon was. It was to these people who were about to go into captivity that Isaiah gave this message of hope and comfort that the Lord was coming and that he would deliver. It is the same message of hope that the Lord shares with us as we await his second coming, a people oppressed by the world’s system and the power of evil that controls it – including all the shenanigans of 10 Downing Street!

I use this image when training teachers on strategies to overcome learning challenges. Of course most of my participants have no clue where I got it from but we as Christians know this image relates to the prophecy of Isaiah and Revelation of the new heaven and the new earth – which is our expectation when Jesus returns in glory to make all things new.

What’s a lion and a lamb got to do with learning challenges? Think again – a lion lying down with a lamb without making a meal of the lamb? That is a vision of great outcomes! I give the teachers 3 tips. First, face these challenges with a vision of great expectations. Then attend to these challenges with optimism – a “can-do” attitude that says every day is a great day! Finally, work with reality, evaluate and assess the learning gaps – but that is just the starting point!

Every Advent season we meet face to face with John the Baptist. He comes as one to prepare the way of the Lord. The wilderness is a picture of life’s trials and sufferings. We are not immune to these as Christians, but our faith need not be hindered by them.

Isaiah told the people to prepare to see God's mighty work of deliverance. John the Baptist used these same words to challenge the people to prepare for the coming Messiah. Today, we hear them again as we prepare for Christmas and look forward to Jesus coming again in glory.

At the moment, some people see life as impossible given their circumstances. Maybe there are just too many crooked places that they see no way of straightening them. Maybe the mountains are too high, and the valleys too low, they can see no way over or under them. Maybe life is a tangled mess of complication. But God's word, God's promise is that every mountain will be lowered, and every valley exalted, and the crooked made straight, and the rough places smooth.

There were two groups of people with John the Baptist. Those who refused to receive this word of preparation, and missed Jesus' coming. They believed that they were somehow good enough and refused to repent, to humble themselves, and they missed out on God's deliverance. The other group cried out, "What shall we do then?" This group prepared their hearts and lives to receive the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

As we prepare for Christmas, may I offer you this image on the screen and my 3 tips:

1. Have a vision of great outcomes
2. Face life with optimism – a "can-do" attitude of every day is a fantastic day
3. Work with what you've got as a starting point

The chorus for the song, God on the Mountain, by Lynda Randle goes:

And the God on the mountain, is still God in the valley

When things go wrong, he'll make them right

And the God of the good times, is still God in the bad times

The God of the day, is still God in the night.

As we prepare to celebrate our Saviour's birth, let us remember that Christmas is about God coming to be with us (Emmanuel – God with us!) to give us hope and the promise of his deliverance. And, as we try to wrap our minds around the truth of the Christmas message, let us prepare in a way that the true joy of Christmas can fill our hearts and lives. Amen.

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