

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Advent 1 (Year B)

Isa 64:1-9 Ps 80:1-8 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 Mark 13:24-end

In writing and reading, speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th'encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

The first candle of the church Advent wreath will be lit in an empty church today. We now know that we will have the opportunity to gather in worship as we as we add light with the candles around the wreath further into the Advent season, but, the advice and guidance for Christmas, and concerns in our local community have stirred up much confusion, anxiety and uncertainty as we look forward into the coming month. It seems to me that the anticipation of Christmas is bringing to the surface all the feelings that we may not have been able to give voice to since the pandemic took hold. I was reading the sermon I preached last Advent Sunday, and it feels as though it was written for another world! The year we have lived through, however courageously and stoically, has changed us and the environment we share.

The church offers us Advent, a time when we are given the stories of our ancestors in faith to help us remember that we are not alone in all that we are feeling and struggling with and in all that we are re-discovering to be life-giving and sustaining. This year, especially, it seems to me, that recognising that their journeys, their struggles, above all, their longings are similar to our longings now, is the gift of this season for us this year. So, unusually I am stepping away from a focus on the gospel set for the day to take us back to Abraham and Sarah, whose candle is lit today.

What can we remember about the stories of Abraham and Sarah? They were advanced in years and childless, part of a wealthy family in Ur, a major Chaldean city, when Abraham experienced God's call to set out for an unknown land, promised to him, with the promise of descendants too. After many perilous experiences (much of the book of Genesis narrates these) and false turns, Abraham and Sarah and Isaac their son come to the land and so begins the story of the people of God according to the scripture we inherit.

In church we tend to read little bits of the story of their journey – the calling and covenant with God, the visit of the messenger of God who predicts Isaac's arrival, much to Sarah's wry amusement, but if we read even what is given fully in Genesis we enter into a much more precarious experience with them. When they set out they had no real idea of what was ahead. There were times of danger and isolation, times of difficult decisions like parting from Lot, their nephew when the land could not sustain them all, and a time when Abraham believed he was being called to sacrifice the very son that he had longed for. If we add to the text our own sense of empathy and imagination then when we look at Abraham and Sarah we see two people who were compelling by a longing and a conviction that God would provide, but who travelled through uncertainty, fear and apparent dead ends, one step at a time. They might have had a faith in the God who led them, but mid-journey they were in a wilderness with only the longing to keep them going.

As we remember them, as the patriarch and matriarch of the faith, the tradition is that we light a candle. The candle honours them, giving thanks for their faith and celebrating God's fulfilment of their faithful longings. We honour them for their faith and trust and we see God's faithfulness in fulfilling that to which he had called them. The traditional prayer asks that we can be like them in their obedience, and expresses trust in God's fulfilment of promise. Both these are good things to pray.

But I hope this year our candle for Abraham and Sarah shines a wider light for us, helping us to know that their journey was not just an obedient beginning and a fulfilled end – but also a long time of waiting and watching and doubting and fearing, of human ingenuity, of human failure, of difficulty in relationship with one another and God, and of times of deep intimacy too. In other words, their story is very like the story we might be in the midst of too.

Abraham and Sarah's faith was deeply intertwined with what they longed for – a child, descendants, a land. Through Advent we are going to hear the scriptures voice in faith the longings of God's people through the ages. Our Advent journey points to the fulfilment of all our longing in Jesus, and as we make our haphazard and precarious journey towards receiving him we too can join our voices, the voices of the people of God in our generation in speaking our longings to God and each other, for which we seek fulfilment.

This Advent, disrupted as it is, is a time when we might be able to become quite clear about what is truly important to us, what we long for. Perhaps we can join the journey of this Advent, to those of the faithful ones before us, by using this time of lighting candles as a time to voice to God what we long for right now, and to seek just enough of God's light to make each new step towards what God will fulfill in us and through us.

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