

12-01-2024 Worship Service

Morning Prayer – Ann Hiebert and her dad, Arlin Ratzlaff have been keeping vigil with her mother, Janora, for many days already. It has seemed that Janora was very near death several times, but she continues. We'll pray for them this morning. Today also marks one year since Myron died.

Loving God, we do bring Ann and her family to you in our prayers – with love and concern. We have seen the ways you've been present to Ann, her mom and dad in these most recent days of watching and waiting, of hand-holding and head-stroking, of prayers and memories, laughter and tears. We ask for your continued presence with them, with Ann's brother and his family, with Garrett and Brittany, Elliot and Reagan, Weston and Courtney, Wyatt and Haydin, Lucas and Michelle. Be with them all as they grieve and celebrate another loved one in their family. Continue to hold them in your care.

O God, we also bring to mind those we know and love who are experiencing illness or pain and we ask for your healing.

We pray for your comfort, God, for those who may be feeling sad or lonely, discouraged or depressed. We ask for your Spirit's presence in mind, body and soul.

The world can often seem like a dark, scary place with wars raging and an unwillingness on the part of many to bring suffering to an end. Sovereign God, we ask for your compassion, for your Spirit of justice and peace to prevail, for humanity to find its senses and stop bringing death and destruction to people, to the earth. We ask that fear and hate would be replaced by efforts to understand and tolerate. We believe and we trust that love will ultimately win.

We thank you, God, for the community worship service that took place last week. We thank you for all who were able to be present and for all the saints who've gone before in this community.

We ask for your continued guidance and for your Spirit's continued presence with us.

Be with us now as we worship you through word and song, through fellowship and prayer. Bless our time together. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Offering Prayer – God of all goodness, we give you thanks for these gifts of money and for all the ways you gifted us. Grant us generous hearts and minds that we may return, in thanksgiving and gratitude, a goodly portion of what we've been given. Amen.

Message --

Advent 1

The Days Are Surely Coming...

Last Sunday we heard a moving message from Peter Goerzen. He talked about the wonderful events and celebrations we've had this year of commemorating our forebears' migration and settling here. He said that the events have been well-planned, enjoyable and meaningful, that throughout the year families and friends from many miles and various locations came together to reunite and reminisce and at each gathering God's sustaining faithfulness to our ancestors was remembered and emphasized.

Alongside of all those wonderful aspects of our celebrations, Peter reminded us that our forebears emigrated *twice* in one century and that *we* are currently deeply rooted and firmly settled here now, for 150 years. He said he felt a bit unsettled about being so settled and he challenged us to recall some of the reasons our ancestors made the decisions to pick up and move.

Those decisions were made for a variety of reasons, but a primary conversation was about their faith convictions that ran deep and were non-negotiable. Their commitment to following Jesus' example of peace and nonresistance was resolute and they felt compelled to resist any military service that might put them in a position of being expected to take someone's life out of allegiance to any nation's government. In the early 19th century our forebears began to settle comfortably into the persuasive German nationalism that sprang out of the Napoleonic wars. There were calls for German and Dutch Mennonites to fight "with God, for king and fatherland" as they hoped the military might be able to save their property, their possessions, and their way of life. The call to fight was written in a Mennonite newspaper to which a strong and straightforward response came from Wilhelm Ewert pleading with his Mennonite brethren to consider thoughtfully, prayerfully and faithfully, the mandate they had accepted from Jesus – not to settle! But to persevere in their *faith*, not just in their familial, Mennonite heritage, and to seek hope for their lives only in the guidance and faithfulness of God.

Peter gave us solid reminders that at least part of the point of commemorating 150 years of something is to look back – as well as to look forward... which is a perfect segue into our texts for this morning.

On this first Sunday of Advent, 2024, our scripture texts also kind of take us "back to the future". Both passages are looking forward from where they are. So, for the prophet Jeremiah, that was looking forward from about the year 587 BCE. He was anticipating the Hebrews' return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian siege. He was dreaming about the repopulation and resettlement of the people and also, maybe most importantly, Jeremiah was looking forward to the reinstatement of the leadership of the sacked city. Jerusalem was a wicked city, according to Jeremiah. Its religious leaders (who were also its political leaders) had not listened or been attentive to God's covenant. In fact, they had pretty much just forgotten about it – at least, they behaved and governed as if they had. Jeremiah understood the burning and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, specifically, as the logical consequence of their unfaithfulness and their wickedness. Hopes for repentance, restoration and renewal were always on the minds of Jeremiah and the other prophets – and that's what they were looking forward to and calling for.

But "hope", for the prophets, was always about God. In fact, they discouraged seeking hope in anything BUT God! The prophets *had* hope and they *thought* and *preached* and *dreamed* about hope because of their faith in God. "God alone is trustworthy and faithful and worthy of hoping in", they preached. They strongly advised against putting our hope in princes or armies, or violence or political power, or in sports teams or fast cars or the stock market... or anything other than God!

In the Bible, hope isn't just the anticipation of a positive outcome based on reason, like when you hope for certain Christmas presents based on the fact that you've been good this year. Hope

is the anticipation of a positive outcome based on God's trustworthiness. The Hebrew words that have been translated as hope convey things like waiting, anticipating, expecting the promise to be fulfilled – but only because God made the promise. And God had promised to restore the fortunes of Israel and Judah, forgive their sins and release them from foreign captivity. Jeremiah had reported this a couple of chapters earlier, in chapter 30 – this section, chapters 30-33 in Jeremiah is sometimes called “The Little Book of Comfort” because Jeremiah takes a break from his judgment and ranting and, at this point, offers the people a word of comfort from God.

So, based on Jeremiah's word from God that there would be restoration and resettlement, Jeremiah is assuring the people that their hope is in these promises from God – and that hope involves engaged waiting, expectant, patient, attentive waiting for God to do what God has said will be done. There's no indication of WHEN these promises will be fulfilled, only that they will be. But what the people need to understand is that God is not interested in this forgiveness and restoration only for their sake! God wants to show God's own Sovereignty and goodness to the watching nations – to show that God's covenant people can be a light to the world, salt for the earth. God and God's people, honoring the covenant together, can co-create a completely different and unexpected reality in which justice and righteousness will reign. As the people return to their former homes and lands, they and God can show the world what it looks like when the one in charge is called “The Lord is our righteousness”.

As we look back with Jeremiah to the time of the destruction of the Temple and the promise of God to repair and resettle and renew the covenant, we also look forward to the time of the Gospel of Luke – when the people are still waiting! So... that's like, another 500+ years that God's people have continued to wait, to expectantly hold onto this hope and trust that the promise will be brought to fruition.

Of course, by the time of the writing of the Gospels, God's people were again under the oppression of a foreign power – this time it was Rome. Here we have the prophet Jesus giving his followers a warning that's very similar to the one Jeremiah had given those centuries before! “Wait! Watch for the signs – distress among the nations, distress on the earth, fear and foreboding... Watch the trees; when they sprout leaves you'll know that summer is near. When these things happen you'll know that the kingdom of God is near.” These things have been happening for centuries and just as the writer of Matthew recorded, Jesus said... “concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”

In 2024, God's people still need reminders to wait, to watch, to not give up hope for God's promises to be fulfilled. This is why the season of Advent is so important. In a world that's still churning with injustice and fear, when there's a much distress among nations and roaring of the sea as there has ever been, we need to remind ourselves and each other to stay alert, keep watching for the signs that God's kingdom is coming in its fullness. This is why it's important not to sing Christmas carols before Christmas. Singing the Advent hymns is part of the expectant waiting.

As we enter this Advent season again, I wonder how we can be small signs of God's hope, following Jesus' examples of living with grace rather than fear. I wonder what kinds of good

news we might bring to the poor or how we might shine God's Light into a place of darkness for someone. I wonder how we can encourage one another to wait in hope, expectantly, watching to identify God's movement in this world, participating when we can, in ways that help to redeem and restore – relationships, the earth... ways that we, as God's faithful people, can imagine and then show what justice and righteousness in the land look like.

These two passages, from the prophet Jeremiah and the Gospel of Luke, have given us ways to look back and see God's faithfulness through time. They also help us to look forward to a time when God's plans will come to full fruition. May our hearts and minds be open, attentive, ready to respond to the assurances of God's love and longing for this world to be made whole, to thrive in God's peace, to experience God's justice. Amen.

Benediction – Wake up! Stay alert! Live into the hope of God's promises and watch for the signs of God's presence in the world – and in your life.