

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

November 29, 2009

Rev. Roger Rapp

Worship Theme: Clearing the Way

I Thessalonians 3:9-13

Our worship theme for today, “Clearing the Way” sounds the first note of Advent, that little liturgical season of four Sundays as we move toward the festival of the Nativity of our Lord, or, in language most people understand, the celebration of Christmas.

Once again, Advent begins another liturgical year, a season of great expectation and great anticipation of the mighty acts of God in the past, in the present, and even in the future.

God’s people have always lived in great expectation. The Ancient believers anticipated “a righteous Branch to spring up for David” as we heard in the lighting of the first Advent candle just a few minutes ago.

In today’s world especially, what with so many distractions and obstacles that would stifle our faith, there are always signs and reminders of the faith that resides in our hearts and in the heart of our life together as the body of Christ in this time, and in this place.

Last week Bob Garrard mentioned how contemporary films such as 2012 speak of the apocalypse and the end of the world. This sells and manipulates our notions of the possible end of the world as we know it.

Last week, I noticed a review of another such film, called “The Road”, where a father and a son are struggling to survive in a future world that is largely destroyed. Another film with a grim view of the future, where even the basic elements of love and trust seem to be like a small teaspoon against a raging tide of hopelessness and evil.

Such it is in the world today. A world that seems less and less secure. A world where the future seems uncertain. Even as we approach the holidays, there is an uneasiness. Did last Friday really turn out to be “black Friday”, when merchants turn a profit and go out of the red and into the black?

Last week I noticed on the internet a department store encouraging people to get in line for bargains for shopping. It was striking to me that the visual image of a line was a black and white photo of men standing in line with coats and top hats. The picture was lifted from the food lines of the Great Depression of the 1930’s.

How do we “clear the way” for these last weeks of 2009, as the jobless vainly search for work, drugs and alcohol invade our neighborhoods, wars continue to rage, and when “traditional” families, such as a father, mother, and children under one roof, are a minority.

It is easy and tempting to view the world around us with a sinking feeling of despair and hopelessness. There is much evidence that could be marshaled to discourage anyone about the future.

Yet, here we are, and here we have readings that remind us of our God that is present, not just when “life is good” (to borrow from a popular clothing line), but when life is not so good. In fact, when life is downright depressing and dismal.

Even in these times, as in times past, God's word and God's people are reminders of the Spirit that dwells in our hearts, in the church, and in the world. The Spirit of the living God cannot be extinguished by any obstacle that would block us from drawing upon the resources that God provides.

In our Gospel reading, for example, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. But instead of wallowing in woe, Jesus announces that God will indeed have the last word when the Son of Man returns in all of his glory.

Therefore, God's people shall be given strength to stand firmly and confidently in the faith, with the sure and certain hope of God's coming: Past, Present, and Future.

What is the difference between false optimism and real hope? What is the difference between merely optimistic in a shallow, wistful way and the hope that comes from knowing the God of Abraham, Isaac, David, Jesus and our living sisters and brothers in the faith?

Last week, we held a memorial service for one of our long term members, Margaret Symmonds. Sadly, I did not have the privilege of knowing her. But I met her through her family, and through her husband Jim. I was introduced to a family that was saddened by the loss of a wife, a mother, and grandmother. But there was also present a hope of life everlasting, a faith that God was with them in the best of times, and even during those difficult years of illness and suffering. God was at work in this family, even though pain and suffering were also present.

It's sort of like a jigsaw puzzle. When you start a puzzle, it is confusing and chaotic. But as the pieces are put together, the whole picture emerges, then comes to completion with the final piece.

When we are “Clearing the Way” during this Advent season, in this “puzzling” state of affairs in the world today, whether it be Jerusalem under siege, the congregation at Thessalonica under attack, the world as we know it changing before our eyes, perhaps we can use the image of a puzzle. Real hope, perhaps, can be described as taking a look at all “the pieces” without flinching, or despairing, realizing that God’s design will in time emerge. Imitating Paul, who offers extravagant praise to God even in the face of opposition and persecution, we, too, can keep our eyes on what God is doing in the world. We can bear witness to the hope that is within us, that God is at work...Past, Present, and Future.

Allow me to offer the following litany that I hope will serve to assist us in “Clearing the Way” for Jesus during this season of Advent:

CHRIST COME: not only in inspirational worship, but in the lives of those who hunger and thirst, literally.

CHRIST COME: not only in our always temporary human plans and dreams, but in the life of a brother or sister as death draws near.

CHRIST COME: not only in the love and intimacy of the newly married, but into the lives of those, married and single, who know of Christ’s love that is greater than the love of any human relationship.

CHRIST COME: not only with holiday parties carried off on schedule, but into the hearts of those who haven't and will not be invited to any party.

CHRIST COME: Not only at the end of history, but in our time and in our place.

Amen....and Amen