

ELPC, December 24, 2017

TEXT: Titus 2:11–14

TITLE: Advent Waiting: Blessed Hope

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all...” those words pretty well sum up the Word of God that will be proclaimed near and far today. The 4 verses from the second chapter of Titus I just read, are pale in comparison to the other lectionary passage for today from Isaiah 9 that declares: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined....For a child has been born for us, a son given to us.” Nor is the Titus passage as descriptive as Jesus’ birth narrative in Luke 2 read by Vince, which tells us of Joseph and Mary traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register as decreed by Augustus, and while on their way the Christ child was born, wrapped, swaddled and laid in the manger, as there was no proper room in the inn. In Paul’s letter to Titus there’s no report of shepherds watching over their flocks by night and seeing a bright star shining in the East. Likewise, there is no visitation of an angel pronouncing the birth of the Messiah in the City of David, nor the appearance of a heavenly host singing a chorus of praise God: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those God favors.” Titus does not issue a report of shepherds hastily following the star and finding Mary, Joseph and the child lying in a manger.

That is the story of Christ’s birth we have come to hear. It is the foundational story of that which we believe: God so loved the world that God sent the only begotten son, to redeem back to God, everyone and everything in the world that is broken, irreverent, sinful, immoral, and unjust. That’s the reassurance we forego Christmas Eve brunch reservations at 11:00, family gatherings, early gift exchanges and celebrations to come to worship for; not to hear about Paul’s or one of his follower’s letter, to Titus and the worshipping community in Crete, telling them how they are to live. And if you take the time to read the preceding verses in the second chapter of Titus, you might wonder why or how this passage has any relevance in this day and age. As the earlier verses in the second chapter of Titus instructs the marginalized in that patriarchal society: women, the young and slaves, how they are to conduct themselves: to be submissive, practice self-control, obey their husbands, and masters. That’s not a word for the 21st Century and most especially on the day before Christmas.

But beloved, I stand here to share that those instructions are implicitly or subliminally are being communicated today to many who are deemed inconsequential, not valued, marginalized and disregarded. If you’re an immigrant seeking safety, sanctuary or just a better life, we don’t want you in this country; Black and brown lives don’t matter, they are expendable and have no intrinsic value; disparity is evident in our criminal injustice and healthcare systems, and yes, even in our shopping experiences. Twice this season, I have paid more for African- American toys; an Elf on a shelf and a Baby Alive Face Paint fairy, both of which cost more than their white counterparts. Now that may seem inconsequential to some, but what it communicates to me is that in order for me to buy a toy with skin the color of my grandchildren, I and other people of color will be assessed

an additional cost! That's insulting, insensitive, unjust and not equitable. However, the most recent insult added to injury, is the proclamation of "the greatest Christmas gift ever" that was signed into law this past week and that is promised to keep on giving for years to come, but only if you're a member of the rich and famous! Keep your head down, keep your nose to the grind stone, be quiet, don't complain, be obedient to those in power, and if you do those things we will throw you off a few crumbs of an additional \$1200 year! That's the world we live in, where in the words of singer Billie Holliday still ring true, "them that's got shall have and them that's not, shall lose."

You're probably thinking or may even be whispering to the person sitting next to you: "This is not a Christmas message of peace, joy, or goodwill on earth." Paul declares: "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety, and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, just and godly." Jesus' first incarnation manifested God's grace towards us in a completely unexpected, humble, vulnerable way, and Jesus continued to live on the margins in his day, as an itinerant healer and proclaimer of the Good News, a friend to sinners, a suspect in the eyes of the moral right and religious of his day. So, we who are the righteousness of God, are to live in unconventional and unexpected ways by exhibiting the light of God that cannot be overshadowed by the dark; welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, encouraging the disheartened and poor in spirit; standing with and for those who are marginalized, ostracized, denigrated or taxed by society and to be passionately fervent, not zealots, in our well-doing; continually working for the manifestation of all that is godly: peace, equality, justice, and reconciliation. The epitome of God's divine grace is exhibited in the quality of our human relationships and interactions, how we treat and respond to the least, the lost and the left behind, witnessing to the character of God's saving purpose by living lives of blessed hope.

M. Shawn Copeland reminds us living that in blessed hope is not a short-term undertaking:

"Learning when and how, to what, and to whom to give our yes or our no is a lifelong project. It is learning to live not merely in dull balance or tedious moderation but in passionate, disciplined choice and action. It is learning to find support and challenge, courage and correction...Sustaining and realizing our yes from day to day is only possible when negative and destructive behaviors are supplanted by positive and generative ones, when we redeem the routines of our daily lives, when we choose and carry our commitments that give and support life."

Beloved, Advent waiting is not a time of passive, pious or idle nothingness, nor is it a time to be so wrapped up in worldly preparation that we are not focused on the real reason for the season, Jesus, who gave himself for us in life, death, resurrection and ascension to redeem and make us God's own people. Paul declares: "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all!" The Good news in the declaration of Jesus' birth is that the salvation he brings not only manifests forgiveness, reconciliation and

redemption, it is transformative. Like the shepherds, wise persons, fishermen, prostitutes, blind, affirmed, widows and everyone who encountered and encounters Jesus, when we come into his presence, we are no longer the same. Now, we are claimed, redeemed and loved people of God, and God's grace empowers us to live in a new way in the world, transformed and agents of transformation, no longer defined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, class, income or educational attainment, we are the passionate, zealous people of God, agents of justice, peace, joy and goodwill to all, waiting in anticipation of the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ; the blessed hope of which Isaiah wrote:

“...authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”

Tomorrow or later today, most of us will gather with family and friends, we will sit near a decorated and lighted tree, exchange pleasantries, share memories, food and gifts that will hopefully elicit responses of joy and thanksgiving. Today, the Titus passage reminds us that God gave us the greatest gift of all, Jesus, who was born in a lowly manger, a star directed those who would follow to his location where they found the light of the world; he befriended and fed the hungry, healed the sick, encouraged the poor in spirit, stood for the disregarded; and atoned for our sin by dying on a tree that we might be the righteousness of God. God's gracious, freely, given, priceless gift can't be earned and has no expectation of response, except that we always live and strive to be temperately self-controlled, righteously just, and godly; and with God's help drawing upon the best we have to offer, continually working for a new world order where all of God's children and creation are included, uplifted, encouraged, accepted and loved; while we await the second coming and manifestation of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, our he is our blessed hope, today and always. Amen.