

“Not Quite”

Our first reading from Isaiah paints a beautiful, pastoral picture of a lovely place. A place where there were rough roads made smooth, the sick made well. There were strong knees and backs and a promise of everlasting joy and gladness.

Then we get to the gospel, from Matthew's gospel as we are in a new Liturgical year, Year A. John, Jesus' cousin, is in jail...again...for speaking out against the status quo and the authorities...again. He has sent word about his cousin, that they should go and greet him. This would have been a very confusing time all around.

Adherent Israelites of the time would have been waiting for the Messiah. He was promised, and his arrival would be announced by another. For a long time in his ministry, John was mistaken for the Messiah. John was the one going forward to announce his coming...not the Messiah himself.

There would have been many false prophets proclaiming that they were the messiah, they were the one who would free the enslaved from Rome and from Herod. The people were desperate to meet the one who would set them free, physically as well as spiritually. And so they would listen to anyone who appeared to be a leader – anyone who had a slick message and the hint of a promise. When you are desperate, reason will often take a back seat.

John and Jesus did not look alike. Jesus would have dressed as a regular Israelite would have done in those days. A linen tunic, sandals and staff, perhaps a bag if he was travelling for a day. He would eat what was put before him and graciously accept hospitality offered to him.

Not John.

John was a wild man who had lived in the bush from the time he knew right from wrong. He studied the Torah and knew its writings and laws thoroughly. He believed he was sent to announce the coming of the Messiah, as it had been prophesied. John did not have what we would call social graces.

He was plainly spoken which upset and offended the delicate and sensitive pearl clutchers of the day. If he saw that something wasn't right, he called it out. It is believed that John was unaware of personal hygiene and so his habit of eating locusts and wild honey left him a bit out of the "in crowd".

He would not accept hospitality from strangers, especially food from strangers. Now this may make him sound like an unsavoury character, yet for the adherent they knew he was necessary in the story. For those who were waiting for the Messiah, for the Chosen, for God's incarnate, the search didn't end with John.

Not quite – John was the one who announced the arrival of the Messiah, not the Messiah himself. And as much as John said this, loudly and repeatedly, there were some who were devotees of him, rather than of Jesus. Followers of John existed well into the 2nd century AD, and some proclaimed him to be the messiah. In modern times, the followers of John the Baptist are the Mandaean, an ancient ethno religious group who believe that he is their greatest and final prophet.

And so, in today's gospel you see John doing what he does best – introducing people to Jesus. John knew that he had to be careful in announcing Jesus as Messiah, so we worked out a system. John compels his followers to go and see Jesus, with a telling question 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

When they ask this to Jesus, he replies go and tell John all you have seen here, the blind shall see, the lame shall walk, etc. and in this way those who came from John would know that they were in the presence of the Messiah. This is also how Jesus told the crowds that they were in the presence of the one foretold in scripture.

The prophet Malachi wrote: "'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'" Jesus repeats this to the crowd then adds "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Jesus knew that John had a specific and holy ministry, just as he himself had.

This has been a rough week. I went to the Cherished Memories Christmas Service to help in leading the Worship. And I was doing fine until I saw my Mam's photograph and name in the memorial video. Then I cried. Then JJ hugged me and I cried more. Rude.

I am receiving Christmas cards and have not returned a single one.

I have put up a beautiful wreath my sister-in-law made for me for Christmas and I think that will be my decorating.

It occurred to me that I had not done anything for Christmas porch drops and so on Thursday and Friday I picked up a few things for those. I had not written the Christmas letter, planned the Worship services through to the start of Lent. In short, I was far behind and not really in the mood to do what needed to be done.

And so, last night I found a playlist of Christmas music and started packing up the 15 gift bags. A few songs in I was getting increasingly irritated so I found an Angry Christmas playlist with some completely obnoxious Christmas songs that made me laugh and lightened my mood somewhat.

Are we at Christmas – Not Quite – we are still in Advent. And as much as I try to keep the two separate, this year I cannot seem to derive meaning from Advent, which is a shame as Advent is one of my favourite seasons, second only to Lent. Hmm, I wonder why I like the preparatory seasons rather than the main events of Christmas and Easter?

If I may ask for your help – I have 15 bags that need delivering today. If you could help me deliver them I would be grateful. Five go to Trinity Lodge, nine are in town and one goes out to Baynes Lake. I'm quite happy to go to Baynes Lake if you could help deliver in town.

On that subject, I thought it would be a lovely surprise for our shut-ins to receive a card signed by the Parish and so I have cards for each of the gift bags as well as cards for Archbishop Lynne and our Regional Minister Kathy that I'll get in the mail tomorrow.

I'm seeing people in the community who are upset that Knox United is closing. I remind them, with a smile, that the building is closing, the congregation is very much alive.

We have work to do, as a Parish family. We have two worshipping communities coming together to worship in one building. At first blush it would seem that not much would change. Until one realises that Knox is not coming in as a guest, but as a partner.

Are our two denominations amalgamating? Not quite – we are going to learn how to worship together in a single space. Learning to maintain our separate identities while we become a partnership in faith. While we lean into Ecumenical Shared Ministry.

It's going to take time, it's going to take patience. It's going to take communication, negotiation, and faith. It will not be easy, neither does it need to be combative. I truly believe that as long as we continue to remember who we are and whose we are we will find our way through.

We are six days from Christmas Eve, seven days from Christmas Day. We will use the same Worship Links we have been using all year for our Christmas services.

We will gather here, at Fernie Knox United at 7:00 pm on Saturday and at Christ Church Anglican at 9:00 pm on Saturday. Then on Sunday, Christmas Day, we will gather at Christ Church Anglican for Holy Eucharist.

And so my beloveds, as we hold on to the last vestiges of Advent, may we remember that the shopping and the cooking and the card writing and the cleaning may not be done in the way you would like them to be done before the 25th. In some cases they may not get done at all. And that's okay.

This blessed baby boy will be born whether we are ready or not. Just as you who have children will remember; they come when they are ready. Jesus was born in the poorest of conditions, in the strangest of places and yet, he and his family survived. If you don't make Nana's shortbread this year, you will also survive.

As we prepare to worship in this historic space for possibly the last time, let us remember fondly those people who are gone from our sight. Those who brought laughter, music, worship and faith to this sacred space.

Those who were baptised at the font...especially those who screamed their lungs out...

Those who were married in this sanctuary, especially those who were married here 50 years ago...

Those who were buried from this building...especially those from the back of a fire truck.

Give yourself the grace of the season as we come to the final week in the four weeks of Advent. First there was Hope, then Peace, then Joy, and today we have Love.

Love for one another.

Love for those who are near.

Love for those who are far.

Love for the ones who have died.

Love for the ones we miss.

Love for the ones we cherish. Included with those we cherish should be yourself.

Unless you are completely ready for Christmas, and if you are – congratulations – the next time someone asks if you are ready, smile broadly and say "not quite". You will know to what extent. The rest doesn't matter.

Let the Church say: AMEN!

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Elk Valley Ecuemenical Shared Ministry
Fernie Knox United & Christ Church Anglican
Regional Dean, East Kootenay Region

Sermon for Advent IV

18 December 2022

Isaiah 35:1-10 and Matthew 11:2-11