

2024 Cantata

Advent is, no surprise, a time of preparation. John the baptizer calls out “Repent and prepare the way of the Lord.” And so we lean in a little to repentance, “Lord, we don’t deserve for you to come, so have mercy on us.” We pray he would help us to drop the distractions and especially the sins, to focus on Jesus, true God come to save us from them.

But then we immediately couple this with a season chalk full of distractions and busy-ness, and this party and that and a Christmas Program and a Cantata – which, obviously, isn’t to say any of those are wrong, but they certainly, lend us, again, in advent to a whole lot of preparation.

Decorating, shopping, scheduling, traveling, party planning, rehearsals... you get it.

But advent is a time of preparation in another sense, and hopefully one that can give us some rest this morning. It is a time when God is preparing something for us. And the beauty of this preparation is that we get to rest, while he does the work.

It’s been a preparation set up longer than we can imagine, longer than time or the universe itself – long time. Before creation the omnipotent God knew he wanted a people to be his to celebrate with forever in his creation. And he knew he would have to redeem them. And so we see his creation, and his plan to redeem it from the beginning as he promises a Savior a Messiah and works throughout history to bring it to fruition at just the right time – perfect timing ! A unified language throughout much of the world, in the perfect spot, the cradle between three continents and on and on – what a plan!

And the plan, the preparations, take that Savior from Christmas to a Cross – has the plan failed? Is God not capable of overcoming the evil in the world- as he hangs dead? No, this was all part of the preparation, as he promised he would die and rise, as he is the fulfillment of those funny

Old Testament laws about purity and sacrifices. And the plan is so glorious and victorious as he rises again just as he said.

Which is our indication that we can trust every other promise he has made. Which brings us back to today and us with our busy-ness and problems, and pains, and fears, and broken hearts. What has he prepared for us to find hope in?

First, that his promises that his death and resurrection were for us – that we too might be forgiven and given eternal life.

Second, with the hopeful reality that his preparations still continue. Jesus promises he goes to prepare a place for us in heaven (John 14). He has a place for you, yes you, there. He promises a feast on a mountain on the day of resurrection - that's in Isaiah 25. And he is saving you a spot there. Along with all your loved one's who have died in the faith. What a party that will be!

In the appointed reading for today, the Sunday of Joy, in advent, we see that God's plan invites us to *rejoice* – fitting for a Cantata Sunday, Zephaniah writes: “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion, shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, The Lord is in your midst, you shall never again fear evil. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Fear not O Zion, let not your hands grow weak. The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival...”

This is what God has prepared. A festival, a place void of fear or the enemies of God. He goes on to say it will be a place free from oppression, injury, and shame. A place where he will restore fortunes before your eyes.

And I think we can agree that whatever that place is, it isn't here is it? Wars rage, oppression continues in our midst and around the world, as does pain and injury, sickness, and we all have our shame – things we never want anyone to know we've said or done or thought.

So the question then is: Do we have good reason to believe this something, this wonderful festival and kingdom our God has promised, will actually happen and that it is for us?

This is the beauty of Christmas. God's people get to see the preparation unfolding! And it is before the eyes of the world and in real history (Quirinius, Herod, Caesar, Caiaphas... real historical figures) – because it actually happens! Just as God said! This is the beauty of his Cross and empty tomb – it all happens just as he had prepared and promised!

The shepherds and the wise men and Simeon, who said he could die now having seen the child – they still lived amongst wars and pain and shame, but they sang and worshiped and rejoiced – why? Because they had seen living proof that God keeps his promises and that the day of victory would come. And they treasured that until the day they died and actually went to the feast in God's kingdom.

May that be us! Even with our wars, pain, shame, sickness and death. In fact, the darker it seems is more indication that Christmas is more for you! Those in darkness have seen a great light. And from the text I just read: Those mourn... God has a festival for them! If it isn't dark you don't need a light. If we aren't dying we don't need a Savior. But God has prepared One, for you.

And he has come and is with us now as he continues to prepare good things for his people.

Here is our last place I'll point you to find hope today, and it's a good one so get excited. We find hope in the text today from Zephaniah in its grammar. That should cause us all to break into song and cantata's right?

Notice the tenses I read, you heard a lot of futures: he will save, he will rejoice over you with gladness, you will not fear any evil, and so on – all things probably not perfectly fulfilled til the last day – or at least for me because I know I still get scared – but then this is repeated twice: “The King of Israel, the Lord, IS (present tense) in your midst.” And again, “The Lord your God is in your midst.” Now he wasn’t in a manger with them when Zephaniah said this, nor is he in the manger with us here this year.

But does that mean this, his presence, isn’t true? Or had God promised to be with his people of all times and all places? Has our Lord not promised, in his omnipresent power, to “be with you always even to the end of the age?” Does he not promise his body and blood for us?

Yes he has. And he is risen over the grave so who here wants to argue with that promise?

Steps one through twenty of a plan, if those work... can that give us hope to trust the rest of the steps? To trust that he walks with us, leads us, and shepherds us to that festival where the mourners feast, the lame leap, and all fear, and evil are gone. He won’t get us lost, he won’t abandon us – no no.

Praise be to God for his preparations, his plan, to save. Rest in that this busy season of Advent and Christmas, because that promise stays true even in the midst of traffic, stress, and a messy house, and even more, it stays true in the face of sin, brokenness, and death – we need not fear. Thanks to Jesus. Amen.