

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Advent 2-C (5 December 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Baruch 5:1-9, Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6, Canticle 4 or 16

1 Infrastructure Repair

Our campus has been quieter than usual these last two years as we have met online or outdoors for most of that time. Our buildings have not gotten the same level of use that they had seen for well over a century. But quieter doesn't mean that nothing has been going on. If you've walked through the kitchen of the Parish Hall, you've seen a new floor, new counters, new paint, and still more counter-tops waiting to come in. If you've walked through the grounds you've seen new gravel on the parking lot, and new grass where there used to be stumps and tripping hazards on the lawn. There's new concrete in sidewalks all around campus. And finally, that sinkhole in the driveway that I was told would never go away, has been dealt with.

One of the challenges of nearly any project, especially any project on a church campus with as much history as ours has, is the challenge of digging out. There are problems on the surface, but they are nearly always hiding bigger, more structural problems underneath. Jesus said that a new patch sewn on an old garment just pulls away, making the problem even bigger than it was before. Pouring new asphalt over an old sinkhole is similar: it looks nice at first, but quickly the same root problems arise. Small projects quickly become big projects, and the nice neat results you see are built on top of a whole lot of work you don't see. That sinkhole in the driveway had to be dug out, widened and deepened, in search of the cause of the sinkage. Then it took two tries to find an amount and composition of new fill that might keep the problem from recurring. What you and I see as a nice, smooth patch of asphalt is only going to last because of how much of the underlying problem was dug out in the process of fixing it.

2 Prophets

Which, of course, brings us to prophets! Prophets in the Bible have a rough reputation. Nobody likes them because they say unpopular things, things nobody wants to hear. But what they're saying are important things. What they are saying are hopeful things.

Prophets are the people who refuse to just throw good asphalt after bad, but demand that the whole area be dug out, with all the bad material removed and any sources of future trouble, any leaking water pipes, broken sewer lines, or just loose material in the earth, identified and dealt with. A prophet is like the electrical inspector who is a stickler for the code that's going to keep your building from burning down and people from getting hurt. A prophet is like an attorney flagging out ambiguity in a legal agreement that might cause everyone grief later on. A prophet is like an engineer, calculating all the force loads and taking into account margins of error to be sure that the customer's design is based on more than wishful thinking. A prophet is like a doctor who refuses to be content with simply prescribing more pain med's, but wants to figure out what is the underlying cause of your pain. All of these professionals are busy digging out the unknowns, the unexamined's, the unthought-of's. They're creating the space so that you can build a *future* you can count on. Prophecy is the thankless work of distinguishing between reality and wishful thinking, and inviting us to live in the "real world" with *real hope*.

I don't know about you, but when I look at my own life, I can see it's full of places in need of repair. Potholes, soft-spots, corners out of square, decrepit wiring that was "good enough" for a temporary fix 30 years ago, but I'm still relying on it today. My life is full of assumptions that were never properly spelled out and agreed upon, doors that only latch if you shove the handle in a particular direction, and burners that don't auto-ignite, but require I bring a match. I find these conditions in my relationships with others, my life of prayer, my own self-understanding. Some of these conditions I have inherited from my family of origin, some of them I have absorbed honestly from the world I live in, and some are my own special sins and neuroses. Some, like an inordinate desire for comfort and the approval of others, I have struggled with for a long time. Some, like renewed awareness of my own racism, sexism, and broader prejudices, have been brought to my renewed attention as I have observed what's going on in the world around me and my own reactions to it. And plenty of things, I trust, are still below the surface, waiting to be dug out and exposed to the light. Things I still don't see.

All of those potholes, those disordered affections and skewed perspectives, are *barriers* between me and God. If God is the ground of our being, all that is true and right and good in the world, then all the places where I fall short and fail to measure up are the ways that I am living apart from God, turning my face away from God and preferring to believe my own self-deception and wishful thinking. Paul's prayer for the church in Philippi: that in their love for one another they will increase in knowledge and insight, understanding their own places of lack and brokenness, and God's invitations not to remain stuck, but to grow.

So I go to prayer, I come to church, I read my Bible and other spiritual literature, in an effort to invest in my own spiritual infrastructure. That is the invitation of John the Baptist today: to work on those things that are creating distance between *us and God*, between us and one another. Repentance is to straighten the crooked roads, to fill in the valleys, to flatten the hills, to smooth the rough patches, to do all this roadwork to prepare the way so God's people can travel without stumbling and so that the road will be suitable for the King's own carriage.

3 Begun a Good Work

Work continues with projects here at St. Thomas'.

So also, the work on our hearts and in our lives is a life-long project. We are each complexes of righteousness and sin, all mixed together: the things that draw us toward God and the things that push us away. The invitation of Advent is to pay attention once more to those infrastructure projects of the soul, to dig out a little more where there might be some long-festering soft spots, and to put in place the practices and commitments that will provide a more solid foundation for relationships with ourselves, with one another, and with God.

The promise of Advent is the one given voice by Paul today. He says, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”¹ We are not left alone in our spiritual infrastructure projects. Though God employ other laborers, God is the architect underneath, working in us according to God’s perfect design. Advent is the time to repent from everything that distracts, and to engage with the work God is already doing inside of us, so that we too might see the salvation of God.

Amen.

¹Phil 1.6 NRSV