DEC 8, 2019 PR LABC

Yesterday, there was a group of us from King of Life that gathered together at the church, and then carpooled to a local care home

to sing Christmas carols for seniors living there.

As I knew there were several members of the church signed up to sing,

I had briefly thought about skipping the event as I was a bit tired

and had a full day already.

But something within me urged me to change my mind, to turn around on that idea, and join the group of carolers visiting the Care Home.

And so I did, and we made our way, and once we arrived,

there was room full of people waiting for us.

And several more of the residents were brought from their rooms

after we began singing. Many listeners sang with us,

their eyes lighting up when hearing familiar songs,

their bodies moving to the rhythms of the music.

When I looked up from my hymnal,

I often made eye contact with a smiling face enjoying the carols.

And after we had completed our set of carols before we left,

I stopped to wish every listener a Merry Christmas,

and was received with joyful gratitude,

sometimes even with tears of thanks.

It was obvious to me that hearts were touched because of the time

we took to connect with those who are often most isolated,

and share the gift of peaceful music and joyful song.

In that moment, I saw that I did my part to show up, and so did God.

I was grateful to see the Prince of Peace at work in this moment

that I could have easily missed, had I not turned around.

It’s hard sometimes to know what is our responsibility,

and what is God’s responsibility.

What is in our hands to change, and what is only in God’s hands.

What is a baptism of water for repentance,

and what is a baptism of Holy Spirit and fire.

What is the work of our humanity, and what is the work of God.

On this Second Sunday of Advent,

we hear the voice of John the Baptist calling us to repentance.

Repent, the kingdom of heaven is near.

Repent, prepare the way of the Lord, make God’s paths straight.

Repent, bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Yet with repentance,

it’s hard sometimes to know what is our responsibility,

and what is God’s responsibility.

What is our part to change, and what is God’s part.

What is our part to turn our lives around, and what is God’s part.

What is our part in living a life that is in line with the Prince of peace,

and what can only be left up to God.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, we hear the call to change,

we hear the call for our lives to be turned around by the Spirit.

Yet the deep change that comes with repentance,

when fruitless trees getting axed,

is not something we can do all on our own.

For a tree that is sick cannot heal itself, and make itself bear fruit.

It needs help. It needs grace.

And so in many ways, the call this Sunday then,

is to know there is a power that is greater than us in this world.

To know that there is a power at work in our lives that can make

good fruit to come even from sick trees that have been cut down.

It is to know that there is a power at work in our lives

that can make life come out of our tree stumps.

And what grows will bring for us a peace

that we never knew was even possible in this life.

Our reading from Isaiah, about the shoot that comes

from the stump of Jesse, about a branch growing out of its roots,

which is the promise for a Messiah, the Prince of Peace,

to come and save God’s people, reminds me a lot about nurse logs.

Nurse logs are trees that have fallen, trees that are in many ways dead,

and no longer standing, but still have the power to produce life.

As nurse logs decay, they offer shade, nutrients, water, and protection

for the new generation of seedlings that grow from its stumpy logs.

The decaying process of a fallen tree changes the soil

to become more nutrient dense, and to better support new growth.

Sick trees, when they are cut down, and remain with us,

can actually help the new generation of trees live more fully.

And they can also provide a new home for small animals,

and other kinds of new plants to live.

In the face of death and destruction, when we think: Game over;

God tells us: Game on. Because grace can bring us new life

in any situation we face—even in the most hopeless ones.

Even when all we see are a bunch of fallen logs or stumps around us.

*Where are the tree stumps, or the nurse logs in your life?*

*How do you see God sprouting new life there?*

On our second Sunday of Advent, we are again asked to be honest,

and to name the hard truths in our lives.

We are asked to name the sick trees that are in our hearts and lives.

For we are not to be afraid when we do see things that need to change,

that need repentance, that need to turn around, that need grace.

No need for pretense here.

No need to pretend that things are better than they are.

But no need to pretend that things are worse than they are either.

For in our walk with God, it is important to name the reality that is.

And even though there may be some difficult things out there,

our reality always includes Hope.

For hope grounded in the grace of Christ Jesus

is not a pretending matter.

It is not a pretense. It is the stuff that dreams are made of,

it is the stuff that a real life lived with Christ is made of.

It is what brings us an unimaginable peace

we never thought humanly possible in this life.

Because it isn’t humanly possible—it’s possible only because of God.

But first, let’s take a good look at what is actually there.

Let’s take a good look at what has needed to be axed,

in our own hearts and lives,

at the sick and fruitless trees that need to be cut down,

or have needed to be cut down and thrown into the fire of God’s love, with the promise that peace will come from the One

who has eyes to see and ears to hear,

and is able to judge us accordingly with a righteous grace.

And it’s OK that space is needed to be made for healing and wholeness by God’s holy ax and righteous fire of love.

So let’s name it, and not pretend.

A sick tree is a sick tree. A fallen tree is a fallen tree. A stump is a stump.

But God can still do a lot with sick or fallen trees.

Because God can still bring life out of stumps.

For in the face of death and destruction, when we think: Game over;

God tells us: Game on.

*Where are the sick or fallen trees, or the tree stumps in your life?*

*How do you see God sprouting new life there?*

Advent is a time when we remember the heart of our Prince of Peace, and we allow ourselves to long for a kingdom of peace that we are promised will indeed come, that is both here and still yet to come.

And this season, I cannot pretend that I often long for a different world.

A world where there is equity for all.

A world where every tree bears good fruit.

A world where people are filled with the knowledge of truth,

and have eyes to see and ears to hear.

I cannot pretend that I often long for a different world.

A world where tyrants are impeached and not allowed to rule.

A world where there are enough homes for everyone,

and people do not have to resort to tents or the streets for sleep.

A world where people share what they have,

and no one needs to go without.

A world where the earth is not used up for its resources,

but we live in delicate harmony and receive all we truly need.

And when I’ve done all that I think I can to bring,

I cannot pretend that I pray for a different way for our world,

and that I often cry out: *“Come Now, O Prince of Peace,”*

*“O Come, O Come Emmanuel,”* or simply *“God, help us—we need you.”*

In our longing for more, in our life of repentance,

it’s hard sometimes to know what is our responsibility,

and what is God’s responsibility in our world,

especially when we are seeking change.

It’s hard to know what is our part and what is God’s part.

What is our part in living a life that is in line with God’s way of peace,

and what can only be left up to God.

For we still live in the reality of a world that is in great need of grace.

Grace to prune our sick trees, to get to our sick roots

so that we bear good fruit.

Grace to grow new branches,

to grow new trees out of the stumps of our lives.

Grace to sift through the wheat from our chaff,

and burn up what is not needed and keep what is life-giving.

Grace to raise up life from the stones of our obstacles.

Grace to tell us when we are meandering

through the wilderness of our lives that the kingdom of heaven has indeed come near, that God is here, and to point the way of hope.

Because hope bears fruit in our lives.

Hope makes a difference in how we live, in how we judge,

in defining what it is that we see and hear.

In defining what it is that we do when we are in the wilderness,

in defining what we do with our stones and tree stumps,

and the wheat and chaff of our lives.

Preacher Stacey Nalean-Carlson describes the hope of Advent

as a wilderness hope. It is hope that is powered by God, and not by us.

It is hope that not only calls for repentance, but empowers us to repent.

It is hope that is rooted in grounded in the grace of Christ Jesus.

On this Sunday when we are called to repent, we do so remembering

that repentance is a gift of grace.

It is a gift that comes with knowing

what we have been empowered to change by the grace of God,

and let go of what is beyond our ability to the grace of God.

It is a gift of grace to know when we have been wrong, done wrong,

and gone the wrong way.

It is a gift a grace to be turned around so that we go the right way,

and know enough to do the right thing and live in hope.

For in the face of death and destruction, when we think: Game over;

God tells us: Game on.