

**2 Advent C – December 19, 2018 – Sarah D. Odderstol – St. John’s
Malachi 3.1-4 – Canticle 16 – Philippians 1.1-11 – Luke 3.1-6**

*Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down,
Fix in us they humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.¹*

Love divine – all loves excelling – pure, unbounded love. Out of love God created. In love God came to be among us as Jesus the Christ. Through love God remains with us as the Holy Spirit.

The love of God is the very foundation of Christian hope. When we pray Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, we are praying that all of creation might be reconciled to God...that all might come to love God and love their neighbors. This is our hope.

All of our readings for today are rich with the language of hope. One might even say the readings are pregnant with hope. In the apocryphal text we are told that God will lead with joy, in the light God’s glory, with mercy and righteousness.² The words of Psalm 126 proclaim those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.³ Luke’s Gospel implores us to prepare the way of the Lord...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.⁴ In each of the readings we hear some expression of the belief that God is working to redeem all of creation. Charles Wesley’s beautiful hymn, Love Divine All Loves Excelling, expresses this Christian hope poetically *visit us with thy salvation, enter every human heart*.

In his letter to the people of Philippi the Apostle Paul takes up the question, “what does this hope mean for those who follow Christ?” How does one live in the light of this hope?

As is typical of the introductory statements of Paul’s letters, our reading today includes a greeting and a thanksgiving. In his letters, Paul often tipped his hand in the thanksgiving, revealing the major themes that would follow in the body of the letter. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul has two major themes: The first, God is faithful. God will see to completion the work of redemption and reconciliation that God has begun. And the second: People and communities participate in God’s work by setting priorities that reflect the reconciling love of God.

According to Paul, we live in an in-between time. We live in-between the “first day” – when in love God intervened in creation in the person of Jesus Christ charting a new path of reconciliation, and the “day of Jesus Christ” – the day when Christ will come again. The work of God is already begun but not yet finished. Paul tells us that we share in the gospel and participate in God’s good work, but that God accomplishes the victory. God may use believers as agents in God’s divine mission, but the burden of finishing and the timetable for completion are God’s, not the church’s.

This was an urgent message of hope for the church in Philippi. Early Christian churches were founded on the belief that Jesus would return soon – as in next month or next year.

As the people of Philippi waited and waited for Christ to return they wondered if their belief was in vain; some became complacent in their faith practices. Paul reminded them that God is faithful to God's plan. Whether Christ returns tomorrow, next year or in several millennia, we can trust that Christ will return. This is our hope!

Paul understood that the delay of the day of Christ would force believers to confront all manner of moral ambiguities and decisions that demand faithful discernment. So Paul prayed, "...may your love overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best." The people of Philippi faced external intimidation and internal strife – so do we. Issues like persecution, human sexuality, stem cell research, environmental stewardship, poverty, liturgical reform, and economic justice will always be there to challenge believers. Paul was convinced that if we allow love to overflow and fill up our lives, our ways of knowing and doing will be transformed – our priority setting and decision making will be informed...so much so that in the day of Christ we can stand before God pure and blameless. This is our hope! Love is the center of God's being. God calls us to make room for love at the center of our being.

Alright, so I am thinking we need to change the name of the season of Advent. Advent means coming or arrival. This sounds very passive like all we have to do is wait. Au contraire my friends – Advent is a time to reclaim our hope and make room for the love of God to overflow and be born in our lives. Perhaps we should change the name of Advent to "Get your spiritual house in order month" or "Make room for the love of God in your life month"...what do you think? I think this has potential. This could be something like Breast Cancer Awareness Month or Black History Month – something you need to be aware of all the time but which you need some extra help to get on your radar screen. I'm sure that Hallmark would want in on the action – cards, calendars – this could be big.

Changing the name of the season of Advent may be a bit drastic, but Advent does suffer from a bit of an identity crisis. In Advent we are not preparing for Christmas. Christmas celebrates the anniversary of the first advent, the arrival of Christian hope. In Advent we remember that we live in the light of that hope. We are surrounded by the love of God on every side – our hope cannot fail. We are invited to let love overflow and reclaim this hope as our own. This is our hope...

*Finish then thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory, till in heave we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.*

¹ The Hymnal 1982, number 657, words: Charles Wesley, music: Hyfrydol, Rowland Hugh Prichard

² Baruch 5.9.

³ Psalm 126.6

⁴ Luke 3.4,6