

Advent II (C) / December 8/9, 2018
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church / Creve Coeur, Missouri
The Rev. Paul A. Metzler, D.Min. / Priest Associate
Gospel: Luke 3:1-7

This is my last sermon after nearly 4-years as your part-time priest associate.

I want to claim as my own the words from our second lesson: *"I thank my God every time I remember you...because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now"* (Marvin did a similar last week from Thessalonians, today it's from Philippians). I remember my first visit here when I felt pretty intimidated by the whole "West County thing." I'd mostly know the city of St. Louis. But now *"I thank my God every time I remember you...because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now."*

I so appreciate the gracefulness of this parish, the care that when we're at our best is evident in so many acts of "love and service to the Lord" within and without these walls. That has been especially evident the last few weeks when we've had a veritable tsunami of major events and activities in which to share the gospel:

- The celebration last month of Heidi's gifted ministry among us
- The 5th Annual Thanksgiving dinner when 20 parishioners shared the day.
- The *Proclaiming the Dream* event teaching us how to respond to racial injustice with a growing community of justice-makers, healers and reconcilers.
- A wonderful and enormously creative Advent event and a magnificent service last Sunday, when members and music from all four of our weekend services joined together for the Bishop's visit which, unfortunately, he missed because of the flu followed by pneumonia. But we will long remember a wonderful lunch together in the parish hall.
- Yesterday, the profound experience of burying our former rector, Jack Fleming, with wonderful music and prayers and gratitude for his life and ministry. Many of you were there to make the liturgy and reception a love-gift to his family.

There are just a few of the many ways that I've seen the gospel shared among us.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent and as always John the Baptist is at the center.

- His call in the wilderness is familiar: Prepare, make straight, fill the valleys, lower the mountain barriers, straighten and smooth the crooked and rough ways.
- Why? So that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."
- Drawing on the long strand of Jewish prophetic expectation that God would come to save, John announces that the wait is completed, the wilderness overcome.
- John points to Jesus Christ, the culmination of God's love and dream for humankind, so that all might come within the reach of his saving embrace.

John's pointing finger has even gained a place in many works of art over the centuries. The last painting of Michelangelo and the famous altar piece by Grünewald for a monastery (the Monastery of St. Anthony) in France both prominently depict the long, steady finger of John pointing either heavenward or straight to Jesus to make the connection obvious. John's finger declares Jesus is the One to follow.

Luke is careful to situate John's announcement proclaiming the arrival of Jesus in real time, in the midst of specific imperial and militaristic rulers: in the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor, when Herod ruled Galilee and his brother Phillip ruled other regions. The point of that detail cannot be lost

- The reality of Jesus overrules (dare I say, trumps?) worldly power and corruption.
- In Jesus Christ, God's love extends beyond governor or nation.
- Its reach is universal: "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

And then, it's the funniest thing really: embedded in the long list of rulers Luke mentions that John was the son of Zechariah. He wasn't a ruler, just a faithful old priest doing his thing. I took some solace (*and silliness*) in noting an old priest listed among those notables! I know "just an old priest" isn't quite justified given Zechariah and Elizabeth's key role in the salvation story.

But nevertheless, Zechariah was an old priest doing his duty forever when by God's grace he and Elizabeth became fruitful & productive despite all odds. God uses us – young (think of David & Goliath) and old - to accomplish God's purposes in ways we may presume impossible.

That's been my story here at St. Tim's these last nearly 4-years. I thought I had retired, but here I've been serving and we've been fruitful and productive together.

It's the story of my longer term ministry, too. I wasn't always old. In fact, when I graduated from seminary I was only 25-years old. Smart enough to know, at least, that I wasn't ready. Providentially I was led to graduate studies in pastoral counseling and psychotherapy locally with Care & Counseling and the Psychoanalytic Institute of St. Louis. It matured me, seasoned me and made me ready to be ordained 47-years ago today on the Second Sunday of Advent.

Priesthood is always mutual – experienced and exercised in community. I am so grateful to have been in this community these last years. I'm more mature and more seasoned. I am grateful for the warm embrace that Fr. Marvin and all of you have given me.

Though I'm "retiring" from St. Tim's, I'll still be active in several diocesan and community ministries: Episcopal City Mission chaplains, Fresh Start program for new clergy, Confluence– the Spirituality Center "without walls" in our diocese, Spiritual Direction at Eden Seminary. I'll celebrate a monthly Holy Eucharist at a parish near

where we live in Shrewsbury and continue to write for several professional publications focused on grief and bereavement.

And I've even agreed to come back here on Saturday Feb 9th for the *And At The Last* end of life educational seminar!

In his address to the Diocese Convention last month, Bishop Smith (www.diocesemo.org/news/2018/11/17/bishop-waynes-address-diocese-179th) spoke of *remembering the future*: the paradoxical Christian call to remember a future that is still unfolding but which rests in God's promise of love and grace. That's what John the Baptist's pointy finger compels us to do in Advent – follow in the direction of Jesus Christ.

Even though I won't be directly with you in that journey we can follow confident that in God's good time all shall "see the salvation of God."

As Bishop Smith reminded us: "Come what may, God awaits."

Thank you and Amen