

Second Sunday in Advent – 2024

Malachi 3:1-7b

Philippians 1:2-11

Luke 3:1-20

My smoke alarm went off at 2:00a.m. recently. By recently I mean a few weeks ago. O.K., maybe it was a few months ago. 2:00a.m.! It was not a nice sound. It wasn't a sound that Alise and I could just ignore and go back to sleep. The smoke alarm is basically right outside our bedroom door. It was insistent. It wasn't polite. There was no smoke. I muttered, "blasted alarm; confounded and blasted alarm" (confound and blast are my swear words). It wasn't super easy to access. It's a vaulted ceiling and I'm short and getting shorter. So with this untimely thing barking at me at decibels that might've roused the neighbors, I stumbled for a footstool and *reached* and was barely able to lay hold of this uncompromising instrument that was unjustly disturbing the Smith peace. After much exertion, I detached it from its mounting, disconnected the wires from the housing and refastened it to the ceiling. Silence; blessed silence. I climbed back into my most-excellent-side-of-the-bed, exhaled, and shut my eyes. And then, Mr. Smoke Alarm unleashed his shrill voice again. What?! The whole exercise was reprised only this time I took Mr. Smoke Alarm down into the garage and stuffed him in a bucket beneath a mountain of rags. Since then, every time I walk into the garage, he chirps at me.

The Word of the Lord Remains Forever – that's the motto of the Lutheran Reformation. It's a quote from 1 Peter. "...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23-25). The Word of the Lord Remains Forever – in Latin *Verbum Dei Manet in Aeternum* – VDMA. That abbreviation graces some of the Chrismons on this glorious Christmas tree. The veracity, the dynamic truthfulness, the Spirited power of God's Word will never fail, never lose its potency, never be defeated and ride off sullenly into the sunset. The Word of the Lord Remains Forever. John the Baptist's voice is part of that Word. John's voice is insistent. John is not polite, not well-manicured, not content to "stay in his lane." John is a prophet. John is the last and greatest prophet. He wakes people from their slumber. His voice pierces through spiritual sleep that portends spiritual death. Roust, the Lord is on His way! The Baptizer is himself dead and buried but his voice is living and active.

Prepare the Way. Each of you is going to celebrate Christmas. Each of you is going to celebrate the nativity of the Lord Christ, the Son of God. It is worth celebrating. It is a continual present, Christ's birth. Prepare; He is going to come again. The prophet has told you how to prepare. Bear fruits in keeping with repentance (Luke 3:8). If you have treated others shabbily with curt remarks, with pride seeping out of your mouth, with cavalier disdain then you are to amend that behavior. Speak tenderly to those in your sphere. Uplift others with kind remarks, with gentle tones, with respect and kindness. Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. According to John the Baptist, one can't say that one is repentant without rectifying one's poor behavior. The fruit of a penitent heart is to behave in a way that pleases the Lord, a way that honors His name, honors the holiness that He shares with you. Christ is the vine. You are branches connected to that vine. Each of you produces fruit that is evidence of that connection (John 15:1-8). Faith wants

to demonstrate itself. Faith lives to demonstrate itself. Now is the time for fruit for our Lord approaches. That's how Christ's church celebrates Christmas.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:4-6). Do you know what that means? Last Sunday our Gospel lesson was Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It was a ruckus. The Pharisees in the crowd likely thought that it was an obscene display of Messianic fervor. They said to Jesus: “Teacher, rebuke your disciples” (Luke 19:39). The religious stuffed-shirts were basically saying, “Hey Rabbi, get your peeps to pipe down. This is just too much acclaim for a back-water preacher like yourself.” Do you recall Jesus' response? He said: “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out” (Luke 19:40). The joy of Christ's arrival into the Holy City was a geyser that couldn't be contained. If the human element of elation at this arrival was muted then mute creation would sing hymns of praise. You can't stop it. One way or another it's going to erupt.

What do we learn from this? What is the point of comparison? When Jesus comes again, His way *will be* prepared. Christ's church on earth will make His paths straight. The valleys of unbelief will be filled in, the high places of spiritual arrogance will be made low, the crooked ways of man's ill behavior will become straight because Christ's church is repentant, eager for His return, prepared to receive Him who comes to us in the name of the Lord. The question is not whether Christ's way will be prepared. The question is whether each of *us* will be in the crew of those who have prepared it. I have a good buddy who remarks that “If I'm the last one through the pearly gates and St. Peter tells me to close the door behind me and turn off the lights then that'll be just fine with me.” It's a great line. I haven't used it yet but I'm going to – on someone, somewhere. How about we get ready now? How about we actively make His paths straight now? I get the impression that John doesn't want us to be on the bubble, just scraping to get in. Christ's winnowing fork is in His hand. He's going to clear the threshing floor. Believers are going to be ushered into heaven. Unbelievers, those who are already spiritually dead, will be burned with unquenchable fire (Luke 3:17).

Which brings us back to my smoke alarm. It works best right outside our bedroom door. It will go back up. John the Baptist's voice echoes throughout Christ's church. Those who take him down and attempt to silence him are doing themselves and others a great disservice. All sorts of people asked John “What shall we do?” (Luke 3:10ff.). He addressed soldiers and tax collectors, moms and dads, the rich and the poor. Be a blessing to your neighbor. Comfort the downcast. Model Christian devotion for the young. Find some way to further the Gospel. St. Paul wrote this: “Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Romans 13:11-12).

Our Lord is our armor of light. He came into this perverse world and sacrificed Himself to extricate you from darkness. He is the light of the world and He is among us with His blessing (John 8:12). The Lord Christ draws near to us this morning in the most marvelous way. His cross, His resurrection, His kingdom – He draws near to give you His priceless work, His saving blood, His holy forgiveness. We are not worthy to stoop down to untie His sandal and yet He

serves us. He took the lowest seat. The cross; Jesus bore our sin and our punishment and our death; that's the lowest seat. God the Father prepared that place for His Son. To claim you as His own, God the Father prepared a tomb for His innocent Son. Adam's tomb, Eve's tomb, a garden tomb and a three day rest; that tomb is empty. Death could not hold Him. He is risen and that new life is extended to you that you may participate in His victory. We await His return. The Word of the Lord Remains Forever. That Word is here. The Light of Christ shines in this place. That light is your armor.