

## FOCUS: The Good News is we are made righteous through the saving actions of God's hand

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Advent is a time of preparation and anticipation. In just four short weeks, we move from a anticipating the coming of Christ as King, returning as promised when he ascended into heaven at a time that we will not know until it actually comes to fruition—to the anxious anticipation of that which we already know, the birth of the infant Jesus—Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace, the Christ Child, however you wish to call him. The infant Child for whom we wait will enter the world as all too many infants do even to this day—in a stinking barn, without the help of trained medical staff, without proper prenatal care, into a nation under occupation. We know this story so well that any one of us could stand here and tell it. But still we come together each year to hear it told again and again. We come together because we need to take the time to *prepare* for the birth of Jesus as part of our constant preparation for the return of the risen Christ.

But at the same time we say that we know the stories oh so well, there are indeed those in our midst and in our community who *do not* know the stories. There are those around us who are begging to hear the Good News that God has for all of his creation, the promise of a life lived in *abundance* and lived in the joy of the presence of God. Telling the story of the birth of Jesus is easy. Explaining *why* it is important to know that story—or, rather, *why* it was *necessary* for God to come into the world in human form and *why* it is necessary for us to study, pray, and wait in joyful anticipation for not only the celebration of his birth but, perhaps even more importantly, his triumphant return, is not as easy to accomplish. It's even tougher, it seems, to explore the biblical lessons of this season of anticipation and preparation in a way which helps us to put all the pieces together in a convenient package.

As one looks at the lessons for this Advent season, one can find a number of themes presented in the 16 readings that we will hear. However, there are only a few themes that are found throughout the seasonal readings such that we can look at a single theme consistently through the Advent season. One theme, however, that is worthy of our extended consideration is that of righteousness and the saving actions of God.

When we speak of righteousness in a biblical context, we cannot let ourselves fall into the trap of thinking the word has the same meaning or understanding in the Old Testament usage as it does in the New Testament or even the present day. To do so can sometimes take a very clear image and make it out of focus. In the context of the Hebrew Scriptures, righteousness is a very legalistic term. It refers to making one right with God in accordance with the Law. As we hear in Jeremiah, the One who will come from the house of David will *execute justice and righteousness* in the land. We

can hear in these words of the prophet the idea that the one who will come will be in some ways a judge or law enforcer. Then, as the prophet continues, in the days when the prophecy has been fulfilled, *Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety*. In being made righteous, the people are saved and live in complete safety. It's a nice, neat package.

Maybe it's a nice and neat package, but it's a package that is wrapped in judgment and accountability by the one coming from God! The psalmist pleads to the Lord to not only light the path for the psalmist and to protect the psalmist from enemies, but also to forget all of the psalmist's "youthful indiscretions." The psalmist calls on the Lord to *instruct sinners in the way*. Those who keep the commandments and follow in the way of the Lord will follow the Lord in the paths of righteousness and steadfast love. Again, we hear of sinners being made righteous through following the law of the Lord.

It's not easy for us to hear ourselves being called sinners. It's even harder for Lutherans to hear about "doing" things in order to be saved or made righteous. Doing things—following the law, confessing our sins, doing good works—all of these things, and many more, seem like fingernails on the blackboard. Our Lutheran sensibilities seem to be challenged. So, then, how are we to respond when we hear these words in the Old Testament? What are we to do, if you will, about this business of being made righteous and being faithful and keeping the covenant and decrees of the Lord?

We are still called to be faithful to the covenant and decrees of the Lord. How do we do that? By making disciples of all nations, proclaiming the Gospel, baptizing in the name of the Triune God, and coming to this Table as often as we gather together to partake in the holy, life-giving, and sin-redeeming Meal. We are called and gathered together by the Holy Spirit into one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Baptized in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins once and for all times, we are made the children of God and coheirs with Christ to all that has been promised by the Lord God. Fed with the bread and wine which are the True Body and True Blood of our Savior, we receive a visible sign of God's grace, freely given and wholly undeserved.

We are commanded to baptize and we do that. We are commanded to forgive sins, and we do that. We are commanded to eat and drink, and we do that. All of these are commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we await to come again as judge and ruler of all. And in doing what we are commanded to do, we are made righteous, freed from the bondage of sin and death, and promised a place before the Son of Man when he comes again.

This Advent season, as we prepare for the celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord, we also look with patience and anticipation for the coming of the Son of Man, just as has been promised to

us. We pray for strength as we wait in anticipation for the promised coming of the one who is righteous and makes us righteous. The time is not yet here, but when it comes, we shall know it. Thanks be to God.