

First Sunday After Christmas Day – Bob Munshaw

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

The week between Christmas and New Year's is always a strange time for me. There are leftovers still to eat, cookies and pies to be cleaned up. The world junior hockey championship begins on Boxing Day, so there are hockey and football bowl games to watch. Company may or may not have left yet. Many travel home from visiting family and friends during the week. I'm not sure what your week looked like, but mine was busy, and tomorrow we start in on a new year, and I'm sure most of us who are working are heading back to it in the next couple of days ... and life as we know it will begin to return to normal. But I want to invite you to pause briefly with me for a minute, before we kick back into life as usual. The Advent season has been a time of waiting expectantly, and I want to invite us to reflect just a little bit about what we have been waiting for and what we have been expecting this Christmas beyond the presents, food and family.

It's chilly this morning, but I'm not going lie. I have been very jealous of all the snow that they have been getting on the East Coast. Snow and having a real winter are two of the things that I most miss about living in Canada. I love awakening early to a world shrouded in freshly fallen snow. It is clean and pure and so beautiful ... for just a few short hours. Sure, we know that it won't last. Cars and boots will churn up mud and grit. It will warm up and the snow will turn to slush, and the simple beauty will melt away ... but for just a few hours, things look just about perfect.

It's the same with a new year ... It is almost as if we are anticipating a fresh snow that will fall and cover over all of what 2017 has been, both the highs, and also the failings and disappointments, leaving before us a blank canvas ... clean, perfect and new. I suspect that many of us hope that 2018 will be a better year, and that *we* also will be better in the new year. We resolve to eat better and exercise more. We just know that we will spend more time with God and friends. As good Wesleyans we will earn more money, and save more money so that we can give more money. Yes, (hand on heart) tomorrow I will be a better me and help make this a better world. I am so resolved! Really, I am

But let's be honest. In 2018 the metaphorical cars will again churn up the grit, and the boots of life will soon muddy the perfection that began this new year, and soon it will begin to look and feel just like last year, and the year before, and the year before. And so, before all that happens, I am inviting us to pause and reflect. I thought about turning this Sunday on its head and using the John Wesley Covenant service with its prayers of repentance, and words of reflection and challenge, and the invitation to covenant together as a church as we enter a new year together. However, while there is a lot in the Covenant service that is valuable, it can be a little overwhelming to tackle with no warning, and it is also little archaic. Instead, on this last day of 2017, let's reflect for a few moments on our Scriptures for today.

When we look at our gospel reading, we find two individuals who have been waiting. Simeon is described as righteous, devout, and looking forward to the consolation of Israel. He was attentive to how God was at work, and what God was going to do in the world around him. We also read that he was guided by the Spirit to come to the temple on that day as Joseph and Mary followed

the religious rituals and traditions and brought Jesus to the temple. Anna, the prophet, was also at the temple. She, too, was attentive to God, spending time daily fasting and in prayer. Both recognized that in this newborn babe, God was at work in their midst, and we can learn from their brief appearance in the Christmas story.

As a Christian, I believe in my head that God is always at work in our world, but I am not sure at all that I am expectantly looking for what God is doing. I allow myself to get too bogged down in the busyness of work and life, and begin to live as if God does not exist at all, and yet the message from all of our readings this morning are a pronouncement that God is ... and that God is at work in the world. Terry Taylor reminds us that if we will open our eyes, we will see that God is leaving the fingerprints of His work. I think my eyes are too often focused on other things.

Our reading from Isaiah also invites us to be attentive to a God who loves and is at work. Isaiah 61 is a beacon of hope. Scholars debate who wrote Isaiah. Was there one author, two, even three? Was it all written in the 8th century, BC, or are scholars correct in dating the second half of the book in the post exilic period? Either way, this is a word of hope in the midst of troubled times for Israel. The first few verses of chapter 61 are not assigned to us today, but give us a little context to the readings we have from the end of Isaiah 61 and the beginning of chapter 62. According to Luke 4, this message from early in Isaiah 61 are words Jesus read in the synagogue at the beginning of his ministry: *The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* Then Jesus claims, ... *This Scripture has come true today before your very eyes.*

With this in mind, look again at our assigned reading from Isaiah: *I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

The prophet clearly believes that God is at work in the world, and so we might ask ourselves—as individuals, and as a community—how are we hearing this word about what God wants to do? In 2018, will we be awake and attentive to God? Will we focus our eyes and our minds to see and perceive that God is at work, and how God is at work?

In 2018, might we consider where and how God might be inviting us to partner with him in continuing to become who God created us to be? To use the prophet's metaphors: how is God desiring to clothe me in God's character? How are righteousness and praise springing in within us, and what does it mean ... what does it look like for the world around us when we as the church are a people of righteousness and praise? What might this mean for me and for our

community at St. Paul's to seek to truly allow God's righteousness to shine through our lives and our church in 2018? Will we be attentive and awake for what God wants to do? In Galatians, we read that in the perfection of God's timing, God works. God is at work to invite us into community, into family. God is always at work to seek and to save those who are lost, broken, and defeated. In 2018, what might it look like for us as individuals and as a community to share that love of God tangibly with others?

Our Psalm for today is focused on all of the world praising God. We sing in worship, but real praise to God is not merely singing songs, it is living lives focused and attentive to who God is and what God is doing in the world. Does that make sense? I could spend all sorts of time this morning telling you about how incredible Jennifer is, but the reason I can do so is because I see her every day in all of her perfection. I can tell you all about her because I am attentive to her daily, and she is truly amazing.

We truly praise God when we are experiencing God's goodness and help and strength and hope in our lives regularly ... when we are attentive to what God is doing. In 2018, I wish that I could get it all together, all at once, but I know that I won't. So maybe I need to ask myself, will I be more attentive to God's work in my life, our church, and the world, and will I truly seek to partner with God in what God wants to do in my life and in the world around me? If there is any resolution worth making and keeping, for me this is it!