

HOMILY: ADVENT 2, YEAR C, 2009

CHURCH OF THE INCARNATION, TORONTO

Baruch 5.1-9, Philipians 1.3-11, Luke 3.1-6

The third chapter of Luke's gospel begins this way:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

What would happen if it began like this?

In the third year of the government of Stephen Harper, when Dalton McGuinty was Premier of Ontario and David Miller Mayor of Toronto, during the Primacy of Fred Hiltz when Colin Johnson was Archbishop of Toronto, Patrick Yu Bishop of York-Scarborough, and Lesley Barclay Incumbant of Church of the Incarnation, the Word of God came to the people of this parish and they went about the city proclaiming the saving love of Jesus Christ.

That would situate the historical happening quite clearly in the time of our current political and religious leadership. And what if that really happened here and how? Imagine what it would be like for the Word of God to come to the people of the Church of the Incarnation and they went about the city proclaiming the saving love of Jesus Christ, preparing for the Reign of God?

Well, in fact, that *has* happened. The Word of God *does* break in to our common life here and now. When a person, or a group of people, or a whole community is ready and waiting, alert to the movement of the Spirit, the way is prepared for the Word to become enfleshed, real, incarnate in our world.

And how do we prepare the way? By sharing God's love, by teaching or singing, by visiting the sick, by practising any of our professions with compassion and care for people, by helping our children know there is more to life than consumerism and fulfilment of our own needs, by caring for all of God's most beloved – the needy and the vulnerable, the very young and the very old. And you can imagine many more.

In all these ways we are like John the Baptist. Whenever we take seriously the Word of God as we read or hear it proclaimed in church or encounter the Word in conversation with friends, we help to prepare the way of the Lord, to help make God's paths straight. We are forerunners of the love of God in this world of ours which cries out for the intervention of God's saving love.

As the nations and cities of Canada and the world struggle to deal with issues of environment, refugees, investment policies, terrorism; as they try to help in areas of homelessness, health care, and human rights; as our governments address all these things – we in the Church of Christ are also called to remember our baptismal commitment to work for the coming of the Reign of Christ and to share the love and joy of life with God. And we pray and long and wait for God to intervene.

The poignancy of the waiting, the longing that we all feel for God within us as well as God within

our world, is what makes Advent a bittersweet time. Christ has come, and yet the world continues to suffer. And so we long for the return of Christ as well as for the power of the Spirit in our lives to try to make a difference in the world. Nowhere, I think, is our longing expressed in such a heart-rending way as in the "Great O's."

What are the "Great O's?" They are a series of seven antiphons to the Magnificat, which go back to the earliest centuries of the Christian church. During the middle ages they were sung in all the great cathedrals and monasteries of Europe before and after the Magnificat, one each evening in the week before Christmas, beginning on the 17th of December. They still are sung in communities like mine, and they are the basis of the Advent litany in the *Book of Alternative Services*.

The Great O's are perhaps best known to us in the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," and I'm going to ask you to help me with the rest of this sermon as we sing each of the verses.

Each Great O begins with an address to God, a description of some aspect of God rooted in the Hebrew scriptures: O Wisdom, O Lord, O Branch of Jesse, O Key of David, O Morning Star (or Dayspring), O King of the Nations (or Desire of Nations), and finally, summing them all up, O Emmanuel, God with us.

Each of these names of God is followed by an elaboration of the characteristics of that name, and each ends with a prayer for salvation beginning with the word "come." Each expresses the prophetic message of John the Baptist: as we are called to prepare the way of the Lord, we call on the Lord to help us.

In the original version of the Great O's, "Emmanuel" comes at the end, as the climax, although in the hymn it comes first – so we will hear them this morning as in the original order, starting with "O Wisdom."

- O come, O Wisdom from on high, who orders all things mightily; to us the path of knowledge show, and teach us in her ways to go.

We are desperate for wisdom: How can God teach us how to live? How can we discern the will of God? I believe we do that by listening earnestly and eagerly to the Word of God in scripture and in each other. By having the humility to consider other points of view and to hold more gently our own positions to see what else we might learn. That is something our world and our church could benefit from.

- O come, O come, great Lord of might, who to your tribes on Sinai's height in ancient times once gave the law, in cloud and majesty and awe.

We need God to ransom us, but how? Can we be as open and attentive to God's voice as Moses was on Mount Sinai? In the reading this morning from Baruch (who by the way was the secretary to the prophet Jeremiah), he encourages us to "take off the garment of sorrow and affliction" and "put on forever the beauty of the glory from God . . . for God will show your splendour everywhere under heaven." "People look to east," Baruch says, because God is gathering together all his children." That is a promise full of hope. Just as the law was given on Sinai "in cloud and majesty and awe," so we will see the glory of God in the coming of the Word made flesh.

- O come, O Rod of Jesse's stem, from every foe deliver them that trust your mighty power to save, and give them victory o'er the grave.

The rod of Jesse, or the branch of Jesse, is an allusion to the fact that Jesus' adopted father Joseph descended from the line of Jesse through David. It reminds me of that wonderful passage in the gospel of John where Jesus is walking with the disciples in the vineyard and says, "I am the vine and you are the branches." If we as individuals can stay attached to that

vine, then we will find the victory over the grave that this verse sings of – and not just in the sense of resurrection of the body, but also victory over the grave of our hurting and terrorized world.

- O come, O Key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home; make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery..

Do you remember the painting of Holman Hunt where Jesus is standing at the door that is overgrown with weeds and which can only be opened from the inside? Jesus stands at the door of our hearts and knocks, longing to free us from our self-imposed prisons. The key is actually an internal key, implanted within each of us. Can our longing for God respond to God's longing for us?

- O come, O Dayspring from on high and cheer us by your drawing nigh; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadow put to flight.

We all stand in the shadow of death – not only our own personal deaths but also the potential death of our planet because of the poor stewardship of humanity for this beautiful planet. And we also face death from war and terrorism and disease. We all need the enlightenment of the God who comes as light to the world, even as we are called to be agents of light for others. The dayspring – or “morning star” in some translations of the Great O's – is Jesus. He is “the light of the world” come to cheer us – what a wonderful thought to hold on to in dark times.

- O come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of human kind; O bid our bitter conflict cease, and be for us our Prince of Peace.

We long for some assurance that our lives, our world, our creation will not have been in vain. Over 140 years ago, Abraham Lincoln, in his address on the battlefield at Gettysburg, prayed that “these dead may not have died in vain.” We too pray that all who have sacrificed themselves for the coming of the Reign of God, the martyrs of the church, and those who have died in wars, may somehow not have died in vain, that the creatures God has fashioned from clay may not perish from the earth.

- O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Emmanuel, which in Hebrew means God-with-us, is what the Incarnation is all about. We can not survive alone. We know we need help, and we also know the importance of our own involvement in bringing about the reign of God and the salvation of this fragile earth of ours which teeters on the verge of destruction daily. So as we pray "O God, . . . save us" – the essence of the Great O's – we know Emmanuel is here with us, giving us hope and courage.

In all the Great Os we are faced with our own responsibility in working with God to bring about that salvation. And at the same time, we know that we rely totally and utterly on the love of God.

In his letter to the Philippians read this morning, Paul says:

I thank my God every time I remember you . . . And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

As we sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" during this Advent season, may we give thanks for the longing which God has placed in our hearts for a world of peace and justice, in which all

people may know without doubt that God's love reigns.