

JOY IN SEEING THE IMAGE OF GOD

The candles for the week – Hope, Peace, and Joy – illuminate the way for Christ’s Advent. Their names serve to illumine this week’s Word from St. Isaiah:

*All of you lift up your eyes on high,
and all of you see Who created these,
the One causing to bring out by number their host;
to all of them calling by name,
from (the) greatness of His might
and His strength in power;
not (a) man is missing.¹*

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

In St. Mark’s Gospel for tonight, Jesus asks with what we might compare the Kingdom of heaven. In Isaiah’s Gospel, the prophet asks essentially the same thing to the Israelites. In time, Isaiah’s question comes some 710 years before Jesus’ question. Jesus asks about a worldly likeness to the Kingdom of heavens. Isaiah asks about worldly likenesses to God. Since the Kingdom of the heavens is found wherever God is Present enthroned, the two are asking the same thing: to what can you liken God and His heavenly kingdom?

The short answer to that is God and the kingdom of the heavens are both found most clearly in the Christ. Jesus is the Image of the living God in our flesh.² In that flesh, Jesus the Christ bore our sins, and the sins of the whole world, into death. His blood covered over all your sins. His resurrection opened the Kingdom of the Heavens

¹ Isaiah 40:26.

² II Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3.

to all believers. That all being true, to what can you today most closely liken God and His Kingdom in terms of earthly realities?

The answer I am looking for is the Church. That is God's people, with God's called men serving Christ to them, granting forgiveness, life, and salvation from His Word and Table. Here, in the Lord's services, mortals most closely meet God, through His touch in Word, Water, Bread, and Wine. In places like this, heaven truly meets earth as God's Word shines out into the darkness of sin, including the sin within you. That Voice of God, which is to be proclaimed clearly where pastor, people and the Lord's Table are assembled together, repeatedly calls you to turn you from sin, death, and hell itself. God's gift of heaven as present reality comes to you who will to turn from sin, enabling and empowering you to walk in newness of life. Where you behold Christ, you behold the Kingdom of Heaven. All of that is the explanation to the short answer to the question asked three times in your ears tonight, once from the Gospel reading, and twice from the First Reading.

Since these Advent Wednesdays are designed this year to draw you to Christ in the Book of Isaiah, specifically the fortieth chapter, we will now focus our ears, hearts, and minds more narrowly on the text which has already been placed before you. Twice, in a longer, then a shorter form, God asks His people to whom they, all of you, will liken Him. Twice, in a longer then a shorter form, God answers His own question.

That can provide a lesson that God's people can take from tonight's text. That is, when God asks you a question, you are actually free to wait for Him to give the

answer! And, from the time-spread of today's questions, you can learn that God's answer can take centuries to come to fulfillment. That brings Hope for us who still wait for the Final Advent of our Lord. In the meantime, as did the saints of old, we can wait with His Word, His means of grace, for Him to clear up the questions He asks of us.

As it is in tonight's readings, God uses His creation to answer the deep questions He puts to His people. He has been doing so from His foundation of this world. From the stars of the heavens to a mustard plant/tree, God in His Word uses the visible creation to explain the invisible realities which surround us. How do you envision God, what images show Him and His heavenly kingdom? St. Luke encourages believers who look to behold God:

Since we are offspring of God, we ought not suppose gold, or silver, or stone, (an) engraved work of art, and of design of man to be like the Divine Nature.³

Such things are in church buildings even now. As has already been stated, you may see God and His Kingdom in the visible Church. Look around you. In front of you, or next you, there are hymnals. They contain the translated Word of God, in verse, hymn, and chant. Yet, they are not God. On the wall you see an empty cross over tablets engraved with a translation of the Word of God. Yet, they are not God. On the Table of the Lord you see the Lectionary, candles, and paraments of the color of Joy. Yet they are not God. You see the Altar Table. Yet it is not God. You see an image of Christ suspended upon this pulpit, placed here to hang in front of the men whom God calls to

³ Acts 17:29.

proclaim Christ-crucified to you for the forgiveness of all your sins. Yet neither crucifix nor preacher is God. And so looking about in the Church, you can discover “not God.” So, where are you to see God in the Church?

You are to behold God in those who bear His full and complete image. That is, you see God in your neighbor who remains a believing, baptized, and confessing Christian.⁴ In a manner such as Christ is the visible image of the invisible Father, you, dear redeemed of the Lord, are today the image of Christ to one another. And, you are the image of God to unbelievers.⁵ How have you been doing in keeping God’s image before your Christian brothers and sisters, and in the face of this fallen world?

As your honest answer to that question must be, “not well,” then you are aware of the sinful image – the inheritance you received from Father Adam – which will cling to you all of your mortal days. Repent! It is from that image you are to turn, to drown – remember the washing of regeneration and renewal with which God has washed you. Believe that Jesus died in your sins to bring you continual forgiveness from them.

Know that in that baptismal flood you have received not only the eternal Name of God, but His Image. For in dying with Christ and then rising with Him in the Water and Word of Holy Baptism, you have been clothed with Christ, and bear the image of the invisible God. You have been freed to live as Christ in this fallen world. And that, dear ones in Christ, means you bear His image – all of it – humiliation in

⁴ Cf. *Romans* 8:29; *I Corinthians* 11:7, 15:49; *Colossians* 3:10.

human nature; glory of the cross; death of the grave; and the glories of resurrection and ascension.

This is nothing new. Some twenty-seven centuries ago, God, through the prophet Isaiah, told His people, many of whom had witnessed the forced deportation of ten of their twelve tribes on account of their sins, to

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and all of you see Who created these,
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The ancient faithful, suffering under the humiliation of death, defeat, and deportation, were waiting to see God. They desired to know that He was with them, even as they suffered His wrath at their nations' unrepentant sinfulness. To answer their need to behold Him, He turns their eyes from their destruction to the beauty of His creation. He moves them, through His Word to remember that He has named all the heavenly hosts, and calls all of them by name. That means that He also has the power and might to call His people by their names.

The hope, peace, and joy that the faithful received in the midst of their national tribulation long ago came from knowing that the God of the Heavens knew them also. In that knowledge, through the Faith, God's people endured through generations; through the destruction of the earthly Temples – three times – until they

⁵ See *Romans* 1:23.

could see God in our flesh. Seven centuries passed. Yet, through all that time, there remained a faithful few who believed they could see God in His Promise, through His visible Creation they waited for God to make Himself visible. That He did in the incarnation, birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus the Christ.

Almost twenty centuries have passed since a few hundred true believers beheld God in our flesh. Some witnessed His birth. Some saw His ministering work. Some saw His beating and bloody death. A handful at first, then hundreds, witnessed His resurrected body over 40 days. A few witnessed His ascension. Perhaps only one – His mother – witnessed all those realities.

You today are here on account of their witness. You who bear His Name are even now, through His inerrant Word, being conformed into the image of Christ.⁷ You bear His death in your bodies. That means you are free in Christ to present yourselves to God the Father as continually living sacrifices.⁸ You are free to see yourselves in your New Natures, as the Image of God in Christ Jesus, to one another first, and then to a lost and fallen world. Here you may find your Advent Joy, in seeing the image of God in those whom He has redeemed through the blood of Christ.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Advent III, (*Isaiah 40* Wednesday series)

Psalms 16, 85, 104:1-13; Isaiah 40:18-26; Acts 17:24-31; Mark 4:30-32

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Pastor Michael H. Merhouse

SOLI DEO GLORIA

⁶ *Isaiah 40:26.*

⁷ *Cf. Romans 8:29.*

⁸ *Cf. Romans 12:1.*