

## SERMON FOR DECEMBER 5

Good morning!

It's good to be together again; or maybe for some it's the first time, and we're glad to have you here.

And first off, I want to say that I've been a member of this church for many years, all the way back to the time when all these pews were filled and we had two full-time priests and were notable in the diocese for our church school of 200 children and active social ministries in town. "The good old days." But I want to tell you this: I find this church is more alive and active today than it ever was back then. And here's why: Back then we were beginning to feel a decline in membership and growing concerns about the maintenance of all these ministries and, of course, this building. So we were becoming anxious as we felt "the good old days" passing away. Now that's done, and we've become a family size church with us members pitching in to make a go of it. And sure: we don't know what the future holds: but neither did Jesus' first disciples know. They just trusted in Jesus and went for it. We're back taking it a day at a time, and yes, sometimes it's hard; but it feels really good to me. With others, we're the beloved community.

So let's start with a prayer:

Thank you, God, for this time together with each other and you. We're grateful that we can gather this way week by week, and we pray for your loving and guiding hand as you lead us on our way. Help us to open our hearts, Lord Jesus, and be present as we offer our prayers and praise. Amen.

This season of Advent is the beginning of a new church year, and with it we're preparing for the coming of Jesus which we will celebrate on the feast of the Nativity know as Christmas. So we're getting ready for Christmas; but today I want to invite us to get ready for Jesus in a deeper way, which is to get ready for him *in our hearts*. This *personal* relation with him is the greatest security and greatest challenge that we can ever know.

So to begin: let's pay attention to a short passage in today's Gospel lesson. In it, a prophet called John the Baptist is foreseeing the coming of a savior, and he is telling people to get ready by straightening out their lives, "*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.*" In other words, he is telling them to leave off their sinful behavior and open their hearts to the savior's coming. "open their hearts" is what the word "repentance" is supposed to mean here. "Open your hearts" by leaving off being all wrapped up in yourselves, and going deeper.

I think I am going to give you a personal example of what this means. The truth is, I had a terrible time preparing this sermon. It just wouldn't come together. I couldn't make it work. The words, whatever they were, wouldn't come. Time marched on and I was near despair. Then something just let go in me and the words began to flow. It was so simple! I'd been all full of myself and all clogged up. I had to let go and let God act. I had to get out of the way. Thank you, God.

You see, there's something bigger than yourself, something you can trust, that is *already in you*. You just have to let go, and see. The "just letting go" is the hard part because our egos want to be in control. They want to take all the credit and they're maybe close to despair. But this despair is their savior! Our egos are wonderful servants: they can help us figure things out and add things up. But the savior is in our hearts.

The savior in our hearts shows herself in feelings such as faith, hope, and love: feelings that are good and godly. I dare say that it is these feelings that lead us to recognize what we might call a saving grace, and that we can find in everyone: and obviously not just Christians!

But, what Christians *do* have is a commitment to the God who is love, and whose love has taken human form in Jesus. In Jesus, we see ourselves as God made us to be: good, and in God's image. Jesus calls us to *that deeper self-awareness*. It's like waking up to find that you are a truly beautiful person. It's who you are. It's who we all are. It's who we are called to let other people get this good news about God's presence with us and in us: not something they have to get, but a holy truth about their lives that is already there.

Dear ones. Such deeper awareness doesn't just come about naturally. You have to work at it. You have to give it time. Some people practice what is called "centering prayer" either alone or in groups, and we could talk about that sometime. What we are thinking about is what Saint Paul called "the mind of Christ": Writing to his beloved church in Philippi he said: "Have this mind among you that you have in Christ Jesus." Let's take a minute to turn to our neighbor and say what some of us said here a while ago: "I love the Christ I see in you."

Back when I began this sermon, I said that "we don't know what the future holds: but neither did Jesus' first disciples know. They just trusted in Jesus and went for it". I suggest that when you come for communion today, when you get the bread, remember Jesus is here and say in yourself: "thank you. Thank you Jesus. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."