

**Sermon at St. Andrew's Church  
Advent 2 (B) – December 5, 2021  
by the Rev. Connie Jones**

*Phil. 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6*

Imagine with me, if you will, that you are St. Paul, the evangelist who muscled the early church into accepting non-Jews into the fold. Who for years was on the move, founding churches, fleeing angry enemies, enduring shipwreck, jail, beatings, even a poisonous snake bite – Imagine Paul is here today, as we just read from his letter maybe even the last letter he wrote – to Christians in Philippi. It's just before his execution, probably by beheading.

It's the first generation after the Resurrection. Many Christians still hope that Jesus will return to earth any day. The emperor Nero, increasingly insane and dangerous, needs scapegoats after the burning of Rome, which he himself may have orchestrated (as he caused the deaths of his mother, his wife and all the political opponents he could get his hands on). Christians in Rome are crucified, incinerated, & thrown to wild animals for entertainment. Paul knows that death is nipping at his heels. His prodigious, urgent, Gospel-spreading is nearing the end. So he writes to these Philippian Christians he loves so much. He knows that he'll never see how this all comes out. Will Jesus come soon? Will these churches – often quarreling or confused or lackadaisical, survive? He'll die before the story ends, and he knows it. All he has to hold onto is Christ – and the love of community *in* Christ.

**Paul in prison is a good** companion for us, here in Advent. Oh, of course we know that Advent means Christmas is coming. Little & big angels in our Christmas pageant will scatter silver glitter all over the place, and presents will be unwrapped. We might even say to Paul – cheer up! Your churches did survive!

But on second thought, like Paul, we live in perilous, uncertain, even apocalyptic times. Contagious disease, threats to topple the democratic process, terrifying weather events and climate change and gun deaths at schools. In the bleak mid-winter, frosty winds make moan.....I moan. Don't you? **And.....as I grow older.....** I realize, along with Paul and my dear husband and all my friends who've died before me,

that if this story is linear— with a beginning, a middle, and an end,  
 the way life *appears* to work –  
 that I will *never live to see what the ending of the big story is!*

**But what if** this story is *not* a straight line,  
 where events and people slip away into a black hole we call the past,  
 and the surprise ending is far beyond our personal horizon?  
 We know, don't we? –  
 that light of tonight's stars in the sky burned millions of years ago, not now.  
 What if— what seems past for us, or far over future's horizon,  
 is *always present to God?* In fact, just IS always present?  
 And really to us too, if we look hard enough,

What if, when John the Baptism said the Kingdom of God is coming,  
 it was already there?  
 What if, when Mary said Yes to the angel, I consent to bearing God into this world,  
 her Yes contained too – the reality of Jesus's death and his resurrection ?

What if, for us, who live inside the boundaries and imperfections of our own lives,  
 what if we could realize that the whole promise of God's eternal goodness  
 is *right here?*  
 Because if God is in the business of incarnating himself at every moment,  
 then every “now,” even when it's filled with loss or fear or injustice,  
 even when the days are so very, very short,  
 then every “now” is brim-full of the goodness of God?

**If so, it means,** among other things,  
 that every act on behalf of justice, however unnoticed or apparently fruitless,  
 every act of selfless love  
*participates* in Christ's sacrifice on the cross --  
 therefore also participates in his resurrection.

Think of it this way:  
 Luke, our Gospel historian, *insists* in today's reading  
 that it is in *real time* and in *real places* that God comes.  
 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate is governor,  
 and Herod was ruler of Galilee,  
 and Annas and Caiaphas priests, and so on.  
 We might situate ourselves too, and say,  
 we meet this morning in the first year of Joe Biden's presidency,

when Republicans are restored to power in Virginia, and COVID still rages  
 and rising waters threaten even our neighborhoods.....This is our ***right now***.  
 What if when John the Baptist says, There's a voice crying in the wilderness.....  
 all flesh shall see the salvation of our God,  
 for the day of our Lord Jesus Christ is coming.....  
*The day and the hour are already here!*

**Or have a look** at the reading today from Baruch.

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;  
 look toward the east,  
 and see your children gathered from west and east  
 at the word of the Holy One,  
 rejoicing that God has remembered them.  
 For they went out from you on foot,  
 led away by their enemies;  
 but God will bring them back to you,  
 carried in glory, as on a royal throne.

See ..... the past isn't really *past*, it is *coming*, never forgotten by God,  
*coming down the road in glory!*

**We cannot see over** the horizon to learn how all this comes out,  
 any more than Paul did.

But consider what real scientists tell us.....with our own eyes we can see it tonight...  
 Stars whose light we see, actually burned millions of years ago  
 and may not even exist anymore. *But we see them.*

You might say in the same way,  
 that the miraculous birth of Jesus and the star of Bethlehem  
 are both, *yes*, two thousand years ago, and *also* coming to us in three weeks.

**We are here in middle time**, between the already and not yet.

But lift up your eyes; lift up your heart.

Because every moment is tightly and lovingly held in God's eternal *now*.

Pay attention.

Because love, forgiveness, redemption, and glory are *here, right now*.

Close your eyes and feel it.

Come to this very spot in a few minutes,

reach out your hands for a bit of bread and consider this:

St Paul may be standing on one side of you,

just before the jailer takes him to his execution.

Or someone you love but no longer see

is in the Communion line on your other side.  
Reach out! You can taste eternity on your tongue.