

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.
Please be seated.

In our readings appointed for this second Sunday of Advent, we focus our thinking on the concept of “faith”. Faith can be a challenging notion in these times of uncertainty. It is our human nature to want to look inwards and to want to go into a kind of spiritual hibernation when we feel that we don’t know what is around the next corner. But Canadian theologian Herbert O’Driscoll reminds us that our readings for this morning challenge us, “to look beyond our self-imposed and limited horizons”. We need to draw upon our faith to help us to have the courage and strength to see and to imagine possibilities beyond what is immediately in front of us. Like new drivers, we can and often do put on blinders that limit our vision because we are fearful of what may lie ahead. This Sunday of the Advent season reminds us to choose faith over fear. And we revisit this message on the second Sunday of Advent each year because it is a human reality that we often fall into the reverse; choosing fear over faith. This is not new to the human condition. The phrase, “do not be afraid” appears 58 times in the Old Testament and 25 times in the New Testament. Invariably, each time a piece of Scripture includes the phrase, “do not be afraid”, it is accompanied by an encouragement to rely on faith instead of fear. And so we should take comfort from knowing that our generation does not hold a patent on fear during times of uncertainty. This has been the way for humankind for thousands of years. But we are reminded this morning that we can grow and that we can be more certain in our faith than we were last year, and that we can embrace that faith as we enter into a new Christian year.

In our Old Testament passage appointed for this morning, Baruch strives to use language that will inspire the Jewish community to look beyond the immediate limitations that they are facing; specifically, that Jerusalem has been burned by their enemies. He begins with the statement, “Take off the garment of your sorrow

and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.” Baruch finishes this passage by stating, “The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God’s command. For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.” Every phrase that lies in between is loaded with beautiful imagery of a future for Jerusalem that is very different from the charred remains that they see in front of them at that moment. Baruch also weaves throughout a message of having faith in God.

In our New Testament passage, Paul writes to the community of Philippi while he is imprisoned in Rome. The optimism and joy with which Paul writes is a testament to his own faith, as he was living in truly terrible conditions. While Paul is aware that his own life may soon be coming to a very unpleasant end, he encourages the community to look to a wonderful future grounded in Christian values and faith. While the contents of his letter are truly inspiring, what is also remarkable is that Paul is choosing faith over fear as he writes this communique to his extended Christian family.

In our Gospel reading from Luke, we are immediately drawn into a very sharp contrast between the political power of the Roman Empire, the power and authority of the Jewish high priests and John the Baptist. I am the first to admit that I often find it jolting to have John the Baptist appear in the middle of Advent. By all accounts, he was a strange and often bewildering figure dressed in camel skins and living off a diet of locusts and honey. From the various Biblical descriptions of him, John was a sinewy, weathered character who had a raw kind of toughness about him. But he also had a kind of raw magnetism that drew people to him as he preached the word of God. In this particular passage from Luke, John begins by saying, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” John’s words are an important reminder to us that Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time for us to engage in some spiritual house cleaning and to get ready for the

celebration of the birth of the Christ child. The reference to straight paths and then later to the crooked being made straight is also key. We know in the physical world that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. This is also true in the spiritual realm. The shortest distance between us and the realization of the Kingdom of God on Earth is a straight path. The shortest distance between us and God is also a straight path. John is telling us very clearly to stop creating detours in our lives by getting caught up in situations, relationships, and material things that steer us a way from God and to focus instead on our spiritual growth and maturity that will lead us closer to God. The end goal is that we all “shall see the salvation of God.”

But there is also another, more subtle meaning to this business of making things straight. We know that, when the road in front of us is straight, we can see well into the distance. We can literally see the future that we will be driving or walking through as we approach it. Contrast this with a winding and twisting road that limits our vision and creates a kind of fearful uncertainty in us. When we work to make straight the roads in our own lives, both as individuals and as a Christian community, our faith becomes the driver rather than our fear. And when we rely on faith, things begin to happen. When we say, “Glory to God, whose power working in us is able to do infinitely more than we could ask or imagine”, we are making an important statement about our faith. When we allow the Holy Spirit into our lives, we may experience a sense of restlessness which drives us forward in our growth as Christian people. The Holy Spirit may also offer us inspiration to find innovative or creative ways to deal with concerns or issues. Or that same sense of creativity may become a source of great joy for us. But in every instance, the Holy Spirit is able to lift us above our human limitations and carry us into the realm of possibilities that might never otherwise have occurred to us.

And so, as we take up John's challenge as we move into the week ahead, I leave us all with some questions to ponder. As the Christian community of ACPC, where do we need to inspiration of the Holy Spirit to help us find creative solutions or possibilities for our life together? How might we, as a congregation, be a beacon in our community as we and our neighbours grapple with yet more uncertainty as we move into 2025? How might we model faith instead of fear; both for each other and for those beyond our congregation? What spiritual housecleaning do we need to do, together and as individuals, to shift us closer to that straight line to God and to God's Kingdom? Are there relationships that need to be put right so that you don't need to carry the burden of brokenness into the new year? Are there fears lurking in the background that might be released and then replaced with faith? What could each of us do this Advent season that we might look back on a year from now in Advent of 2025 and be able to say, "I'm glad I did that! I'm glad that I made that crooked circumstance just a little straighter!" ? My prayer for all of this week, including for myself, is that we find just one way this Advent season to use our faith to create new horizons and new possibilities. Amen.