

Daniel Tate Sermon, December 8, 2024, Sunday, St Ambrose, Foster City, CA

Lectionary: Baruch 5:1-9, Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6,
Canticle 4 or 16 (The Song of Zechariah (Luke 1: 68-79)

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, Be acceptable in Your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

Advent is a time of celebration, as well as a time of waiting. During Advent, we celebrate and we give thanks for the impossible somehow made possible. It seems appropriate that our Thanksgiving Holiday comes right before Advent.

The Song of Zachariah is Zachariah giving thanks to God for the coming of the Messiah, the birth of Jesus. Jesus' birth came about through the Virgin Mary. The impossible made possible. Zachariah gives thanks for the Messiah who will save the people from their enemies, who were at the time, the Romans. Christianity, begun in form of one little baby was one of the main reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the end of world-wide tyranny. Christianity's belief in one God, was in conflict with the Roman Empire's traditional religion of multiple gods. Emperor Constantine in the year 313 ended the persecution of Christians and made Christianity the official state religion. Before this, emperors were considered gods by many Romans. When Jesus was born, change like this would have seemed impossible. The poor and Roman soldiers responded to the Christian message of equality and justice.

The second part of Zachariah's song is his giving thanks for his son, John the Baptist, also the result of the impossible made possible. Zachariah and his wife Elisabeth, could not have children. Gabriel, the same angel that appeared to the Virgin Mary, came to Zachariah and said that he and Elizabeth would have a son. Zachariah, even though he had been praying for a child, asked the angel, "How can this be? We are old and Elisabeth can't have children. Because of his doubt, Gabriel made it so Zachariah could not speak until the child was born. John the Baptist went on to become according to Jesus, the greatest of all the prophets. (Matthew 11:11). John's baptizing and his preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, Jesus' ministry, and the disciples who followed him, changed the world and is changing the world still. Impossible but made possible.

St Ambrose, our church's names sake, was also part of this effort to change the world with this message of Christianity. Yesterday was St Ambrose Feast Day, the day the church celebrates his life every year. Ambrose of Milan lived from about 339-397 AD. He was the bishop of Milan.

He lived in a time of poverty and injustice, and he dedicated his life to helping the poor and oppressed. He was born into a wealthy family, and after becoming bishop, he gave all of his property to the poor and to the Church. He criticized the wealthy for ignoring the poor. He believed that when we give to the poor, we are not really giving away what we have, but that we are giving back what has been taken from them. He believed that nature and its resources

belonged to everyone, not only for the rich. He was against Capital Punishment. He urged rulers and clergy not to pronounce or carry out executions.

St. Ambrose stood up to Roman emperors, exercising moral authority. He believed that they were subject to God's law just like anyone else, and could be held accountable by the Church. He confronted Emperor Theodosius for his violent actions after a massacre in Thessalonica, and forced him to publicly repent before allowing him to receive communion. This established a precedent for the church to challenge political secular power. At the time, this would seem to be impossible. But God through Ambrose, made it possible. Ambrose was before his time, a believer in equality for all.

So, in our own lives is the impossible possible? Yes, but we need to believe and remember. We can have our doubts, but like Zachariah we can come around. It's not easy. In my own life for example, years ago all of my family of origin had died, with the exception of my one brother. He and I were mostly estranged, and so I thought I had no family. But then we reconciled four years ago, and because we did, his family and I reconciled. And even though he has since died, we have become closer still. Now I have a huge family because he had so many children and they have so many children. Plus, I have my church family here. It seems impossible that reconciliation can be possible and that death can be healing but somehow, they are.

Jesus' life and death and resurrection is healing the world. Sometimes it doesn't feel like it, especially when there is so much war going on now in the world, and our own country is so divided.

Isaiah in our Luke gospel reading and Baruch in our Old Testament reading say, pay attention to the presence and the coming of God for "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth," a metaphor meaning that God will raise us up out of times of darkness, despair, or discouragement. We need to believe and the season of Advent is reminding us that sometimes we need to wait.

God is dealing with the hard circumstances of our lives. We should not deny that things are sometimes bad. We can take our troubles to God in prayer and seek guidance, and take comfort being in community with each other and helping each other. We can look back in our pasts and remember the times when the impossible became possible and give thanks for them. Life is a miracle. Good things do happen.

Advent is a time of preparation and celebration for the coming and presence of Jesus Christ; first as God made flesh in Bethlehem in the form of the baby Jesus; then in anticipation of Jesus Second Coming at the end of time. And finally at the same time, Jesus, God, is present with us now through the Holy Spirit and when we break bread and share the Eucharist together.

Today we lit the first and second candles of the Advent wreath. Each candle has a meaning. The first candle is HOPE, the second candle is PEACE." Let us Hope that we can have Peace and reconciliation and believe that it is possible.