



## 'Celebrate Messiah: Hope Strongly'

Third Sunday in Advent  
8:30 & 10:45 am, December 11, 2016  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Isaiah 35:1-10](#); [James 5:7-10](#); [Matthew 11:2-11](#)

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Our congregation supports missionary efforts around the world with our offerings—missionaries in places like Tanzania, Rocky Boy Indian Reservation in Montana, On Eagle's Wings in the Northwest Territories, and Senegal. Those who share the story of Jesus Christ with others in those places regularly send us news about their ministry and life. Not only does we support them monetarily, but we also pray for them. At our Friday noon prayer service in the chapel, we pray for each of our mission partners around the world.

Occasionally we have the opportunity to welcome those mission partners to Trinity. Earlier this year, Pastor Chad Rimmer and his family (our missionaries in Senegal) visited. Some of you here met them, and listened to their stories of serving God in a far-away place.

We also prayed for the Rimmer family in their personal life. Natalie Rimmer, Chad's wife, battled cancer several years ago. Well, last year, the cancer returned. Natalie needed to come back to the states for proper treatment. The Rimmers traveled back and forth between Senegal and the states as they attempted to work two efforts: Answer God's call to serve in that African nation and find healing for Natalie.

The Rimmer family's Advent letter arrived this week, and we discovered this family had to choose between those two efforts. Listen to part of their letter: "The reality is that while our hearts are in Senegal, there is no specialized Sarcoma care, so we can't be there. We entered a period of deep conversation and seeking between ELCA Global Mission and other Churchwide staff about the possibilities of reshaping our call to continue serving in Senegal in some capacity. Unfortunately, the realities and constraints make it such that there is just no way forward for us in this role. We have to seek healing, and we can't do it in Senegal."

Chad, Natalie, and their children are living the season of Advent in their lives, and they know it. They wait, and yearn. For inroads to be made in Natalie's battle against cancer. For a calling from God for their future vocation. There is an uncertainty and an unknowing, and much seems beyond their control.

Which gives them something in common with our John the Baptist this morning. I find this reading to be particularly poignant. Can't you almost hear the longing, the waiting, the afraid-to-hope-too-strongly in John's question about Jesus? For, in this passage, he sits in prison. Yes, this wild, wooly, and vigorous prophet who formerly stood out in the Judean wilderness, demanding repentance from the people of Israel, and prophesying that everyone needed to get ready, to get right, to keep eyes open for a powerful Messiah who was on his way to baptize the world with fire and the Spirit—this very same prophet John now languishes in prison. We shouldn't be surprised, you know. John took risks in that wilderness. He condemned the hypocrisy of the Temple leadership. He revealed the injustices of society where the haves cared not a bit for the have-nots. He called for a change of heart to prepare for the Messiah's coming. In that wilderness, John the Baptist looked, for all intents and purposes, as if he were totally in control, totally certain, totally knowing what would come.

But now, having been put in prison by King Herod for his risky, offensive utterances, John is suddenly no longer in control, and less certain and less knowing. Less certain about his own fate, less knowing what God was actually about. John the Baptist is the Advent poster child, as he asks Jesus' disciples to ask Jesus himself, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" He is waiting, and yearning.

But while the Rimmer family may have that in common with John the Baptist, the truth is Chad, Natalie, their boys, and you and I exist on the other side of the Advent story. I appreciate how Luther Seminary Professor Arland Hultgren puts it: "...John stood before the coming of the kingdom, the disciples of Jesus...stand within it." (*WorkingPreacher.com*) All Jesus could offer John was the witness of what was happening when people encountered Jesus—healing and abundance and goodness. Was that not answer enough? And you and I stand 2,000 years later, hearing John's poignant words on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, yet knowing what John could not—that Jesus ultimately would be a Messiah so different from what John was expecting. The Rimmers and you and I exist on this side of Jesus' earthly life of compassion, yet also on this side of the giving of that life on the cross, and on this side of the newness of his resurrected life.

Funny, though—existing on this side of the Advent story doesn't necessarily give us any more control than what John the Baptist experienced. We are as tossed-about by the vagaries of life as he was. One minute you and I are on top of the world, the next minute you and I are struggling to keep our heads above water. Our bills, our bodies, our jobs, our relationships, our nation and world—like John the Baptist we still wait, and yearn, and have so little control in so many areas. I suppose that can seem like prison walls to us, too.

But there is something else about being on this side of the Advent story. There is a certainty to which we cling amidst all our uncertainties, and a knowing that keeps us going forward in the unknown dark. This Jesus, in whom we see God's kingdom for what it is, has come to be **with us**. Has come **for** us. The One the people of old awaited has come. And is ever offering healing, abundance, goodness. You and I and the Rimmers are the disciples of today who, as Hultgren puts it, "stand within" the coming of the kingdom. We bear witness to it every day in our own compassion, generosity, and goodness. And we

bear witness to this kingdom even in our honest Advent reflection, our admitting to waiting and yearning.

You know what our missionary friends suggested in their letter? They suggested that “Advent (waiting) is the posture which all Christians should keep everyday...” They suggested that we live each of our days in active waiting for God's response to all our yearning. It is hopeful waiting. It is waiting that is ever on the move forward with growth, even when the path we're on seems difficult to make out. It is waiting, knowing only that, as the Rimmers put it, “God is faithful and the Loving Hand leads us.”

Trinity will continue to pray for Chad, Natalie, and their boys at Friday noonday prayer. We'll pray for them, not as our missionaries, but as our brothers and sister in Christ. Along with them, we will pray for healing, for calls, for new beginnings.

The Rimmers closed their letter using an Arabic blessing that is the usual response by the people of Senegal for life's surprising twists and turns: *Alhumdulilah* (“Thanks be to God.”). They write, “In life and in death, *Alhumdulilah*. In blessing and in disappointment, *Alhumdulilah*. In rejoicing and in grief, Thanks be to God. Because ours is an Advent waiting where we pray boldly, Come Lord Jesus.”

**AMEN.**

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