

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
December 5, 2021 – 2 Advent
Faithfulness
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On the four Sundays of Advent this year I will share some reflections on traditional Advent themes. Last week we began with hope, and this week we will consider faithfulness.

Advent is a season of waiting, and we have been reminded of how Jesus waited for a sign to begin his ministry and for direction from God about the path his ministry was to take. We have considered how important it is to wait in hope, in hope for God's guidance in life and in hope for the final coming of God's kingdom of love. This morning let's consider what it means to wait with faithfulness.

You may be familiar with St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians and his identification of what he calls the Fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Paul lists nine qualities of the thought, speech, experience, and behavior of people whose lives have been touched and shaped by God, the Holy Spirit. This is his list of the Fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I like to think of these qualities as areas for the cooperative work of God and the soul of an individual or God and the soul of a community. What I mean is this: God leads us toward the growth of these fruits of the Spirit out of love for us, for our good. We can easily see that these fruits benefit both the person or community who has grown them as well as other people. Some examples: To be joyful or at peace is a good state of being for an individual or a group. If a person is kind to someone, the person who receives the kindness is better off. If the people of a church are generous, people in the world will benefit, and so on. Out of love, God leads us in this direction of growth, but God does not force us to grow this way. We have the freedom to cultivate these fruits or not. If we love God, then we will cooperate with God's action in our lives as much as we can. We will choose to nurture the growth of love and the other fruits of the Spirit in our souls and in our lives, and they will grow gradually over time.

Faithfulness is one of the Fruits of the Spirit and one of the themes of Advent. In the Collect for the second Sunday of Advent which we prayed at the beginning of this morning's service we were reminded of the prophets, the messengers of God, who so often preached repentance. John the Baptist's voice rings out loudly and clearly in the company of the prophets. "Prepare the way of the Lord!" How? Repent. Turn back to God. As scripture teaches repeatedly – God is faithful, but the people are not faithful. God's people need to change their ways and become more faithful to God.

The message of the prophets is for us, too, uncomfortable as it may be. In Advent we are called to wait with faithfulness. It may be that to begin, we need to acknowledge how we have not been faithful to God and God's ways. Each Sunday we are invited to confess our sins to God. You know the familiar words that bid confession:

“Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.” What if instead of these words we heard the words of John the Baptist (which we will hear next week) – “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” Not the sort of welcome to approach God that we want to hear, but perhaps in Advent it has a place.

In Advent we are called to wait for the Lord with faithfulness. One route to becoming more faithful to God might be to intentionally cultivate the fruits of the Spirit. Spend time in prayer and in self-reflection to identify which of these qualities it would be good for you to nurture this season – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control. Don’t be too ambitious or expect too much of yourself. Just turn to God, ask for God’s guidance, and offer to grow in God’s ways – even when you don’t want to! We may trust that the Holy Spirit will help us. We are not left alone to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit. God is with us.

This morning’s Prayers of the People begin with these words from St. Paul’s Letter to the church in Philippi: “I am confident of this, that the one [- God -] who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” When Paul speaks of the “day of Jesus Christ,” he means the time when Christ will return and the present age will end. Paul is saying that God who is faithful, who began God’s good work among you and among us and among all those who love God will bring God’s good work to maturity, to fruition by the day of Jesus Christ.

At Christmas we look back to the past when God became incarnate in Jesus more than 2,000 years ago. During Advent we look forward not only to our yearly celebration of Jesus’ birth. During Advent we are reminded that in the church we are waiting for what has not yet come, the day of Jesus Christ. We who are followers of Jesus and people who love God are called to prepare for that day – with faithfulness and by the grace of God. Amen.