

December 2022 – Pastoral Message

*“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” – Romans 15:13 NRSV*

Beloved Neighbors in Christ,

Grace and peace to you, my family, and friends, in the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Wow, the year has gone by fast! It seems like yesterday when we were in our shorts, short sleeves, and had the air conditioning going. The tassels had just opened up on top of the corn and the beans were shining bright green in the sun. But alas, we enter into the final month of the calendar year and prepare ourselves once again for the return of Christ and remember the child who will be born.

We have begun a new church year, leaving behind the stories found in the Gospel of Luke and enter into a new journey with our Lord Jesus found in the Gospel of Matthew. We have lost the green of Pentecost and welcome bright lights, ornaments, and the royal color of blue. Advent candles are lit, and new liturgy is repeated again in our sanctuaries. We look to the bright lights on the wreath for hope and joy and meditate on the reason for the season...Jesus Christ our Lord. Christ returns again.

I have a confession, dearest Neighbors in Christ. I am not a fan of the time between Thanksgiving and the new year. I want to be, but so often the outside forces of the holiday season darken the bright light of Christ. Like so many, this time of the year is hard to cope with. Grief returns, the weekends are upended with places to be, and good cheer is drowned out by caring more for others than caring for ourselves. Some of you know what I am talking about. And a lot of you already know people in your lives that are in the same position I am in.

I am being vulnerable here in letting you know that I wish it was January already. The first month of the year is a time when we annually remind ourselves that is ok to “start again,” as so many of us often say, hoping to make ourselves feel better and not have to deal with loss. The term “loss” has a very wide expression of what it means. Merriam Webster describes it as a state or feeling of grief when deprived of someone or something of value or a person or thing that is badly missed. Sometimes the dictionary folks know how to hit the nail on the head and name what is really going on in the world. And we, beloved family, and friends, need to name that too.

Since 2020, I have seen loss and plenty of things that have been missed, in the parish and in my personal life. Some misplaced, but most others simply forgotten and left ignored. We have watched, from a distance friends become sick and pass away. We have witnessed insurmountable division in our political and social norms. We have gazed at horror in war and violence between cultures and countries that like to do things differently. And we have forgotten how to talk to one another and still be friends and family even if we disagree. If you don't believe me, turn on the radio, read the paper, watch the television, or scroll through social media. We are witnessing the world changing right in front of us, and so often we just throw up our arms in disgust and walk away. I'm guilty of that too. What can we do, being only one person in a world of 8 billion people?

There are people I miss, and I wish they were still here. Yes, I have had the pleasure of officiating their funeral and burials, but I want them back. I want to share one more cup of coffee at a kitchen table again with them and just...be. Just be. I want one more day with my late mother, to share a hug with a friend who has moved away and take in that smile of that little old lady or man sitting in the pew that now sits empty. You want them back too.

The Advent and Christmas season reminds us that we are to be watchful for the return of Jesus Christ, who told us that he would come again. In this coming, it also reminds us to be watchful and careful ourselves for the Day of Judgment when HE will make all things new. We will be judged and what we have done in this life matters. But we don't put on Advent plays, do we? No, we put on the Christmas play where our beautiful and naïve children dress the parts and retell us of the birth of our Lord., wrapped in swaddling clothes, because there was no room in the inn. *(By the way...we need your help with the Christmas play. Get in touch with me if you are interested.)*

We have been given a gift, folks. Yes, we have been given the one whom John the Baptist pointed to and exclaimed that HE takes away the sin of the world. But the gift I am referring to is life. We have been given the gift of life and it is our job to live it the best we can. Give that hug. Make that call. Pay extra for something you want when you eat out. Order that extra shot of espresso in your drink. Get that colonoscopy. Schedule that test that you have been putting off. And make sure you thank God for it! We are given this one life so let us do the best we can with it.

It is easy to get caught up in the pomp and circumstance of the Christmas season that began the day after Halloween...but I urge you to look for hope. Seek joy. Close your eyes and be there in that chilly night when God was given to us, in a stable. Even though that beautiful person is not present to share with us in the holidays, we are reminded that they still are present with us in spirit. We remember. We look at pictures. We read cards. And we can hear stories from others about them as they are remembered. So this is not only a prescription for me, but also for you, beloved Neighbors in Christ. We seek God in the places when we come together on Sunday mornings, but don't forget about the other days and times of the week. Find God in your own way. The joy and hope of the Advent and Christmas seasons are still there...we simply have to remind ourselves that they ARE there.

I still miss those that have gone on before us, but I do feel better knowing that their memories and witness to the faith lives in and among us. Let's use the Apostle Paul's instruction to the Roman Gentiles that Christ is our joy and hope and that in HIS love and light, we are beloved. Know, my family and friends, that you are a beloved child of God.

God bless you all and welcome to the Advent of your Lord. Welcome to December!

Merry Christmas too!

In Christ,

Rev. Erik Karlson

Pastor, Neighbors in Christ Parish