

December 7, 2008 – Advent 2  
Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park  
Rev. Elizabeth Musselman

Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11  
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13  
2 Peter 3:8-15a  
Mark 1:1-8

Hymn: “Comfort, Comfort Now My People” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #256)

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Grace to you and peace from our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last Tuesday, a group of Lutheran Campus Ministry students shared a meal with a group of Roman Catholic students at Calvert House—and we began what will be an ongoing dialogue about the relationship between Lutheranism and Catholicism. We shared with each other what we love about being Lutheran or being Catholic, and then we began to talk about some of the assumptions we might have about each others’ faith traditions. One Catholic student said in a moment of honesty: “I’ve read a lot of Luther, and I’ve found that he resonates with me most during the times in my life when I’m feeling depressed—and so I’ve always assumed that Lutherans are a pretty depressed bunch of people.” My first response was to want to defend Lutheranism against this charge, but I’ve been reading so much Kierkegaard lately that I wasn’t sure I could make a good case. And then I realized that if the student is looking for non-depressed Lutherans, the University of Chicago campus during the tenth week of the quarter is probably not the best place to look!

To say that all Lutherans are depressed is an exaggeration, but one thing that we have inherited from Martin Luther is a deep knowledge of the brokenness of our world, and of human nature, and of human institutions—a brokenness into which we were born

and out of which we find ourselves waiting for redemption. Perhaps it is for this reason that pastor Heidi Neumark says that the two liturgical seasons which are most true to real life are Lent and Advent: times of waiting and expectation, times of our acknowledgement of human weakness when we articulate our deep need for God to intervene into human history. In this way, we are no different from the biblical authors who we've just heard from this morning, all of whom are writing from times of crisis and asking God to break into this world. From the prophet Isaiah: *In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord! Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.* From the Psalmist: *Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him.* From the author of 2 Peter: *We wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.* From John the Baptist: *Prepare the way of the Lord! One who is more powerful than I is coming after me.*

Christ is coming soon. The paradox that we encounter in Advent is that we wait each winter for the birth of a child who was already born 2000 years ago! Salvation has already happened in a very real sense; it happened through a cross and an empty tomb—and yet we wait for the incarnation of the Christ each year during December because we know that there is more to life than our daily experiences of brokenness; we have hope that a future still awaits us which will be more perfect than anything we can imagine on this earth.

*A voice says, "Cry out!"* In the midst of this Advent paradox of waiting and fulfillment, some powerful voices cry out to us this morning. One is the voice of John the Baptist, with his crazy hair and his primitive clothing and his wilderness diet, calling us to repentance, reminding us forever of the crookedness of our paths and our need for a

savior, and ending his speech with a prediction of baptism with the Holy Spirit (which in the gospel of Mark is always code language for suffering). *A voice says, "Cry out!"* and we hear the voices of those who suffer across the globe: those who have lost jobs in this country, and those who have lost loved ones due to religiously or politically motivated violence in places too numerous to name, each instance of suffering worthy of our reflection and our prayer and our repentance over the fallenness of human nature. All flesh is like grass.

*A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said "What shall I cry?"* In the midst of Advent, we hear voices of suffering and voices calling us to repent. But then, breaking into the suffering, we also hear the hope-filled voice of the Psalmist, who says: *God will speak peace to his people. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

What would our world look like if steadfast love and faithfulness were to meet, if righteousness and peace were to kiss each other? Would there be no more sin, no more snow, no more stress or final exams, no more broken relationships, no more violence, no more poverty, no more death, no more anxiety, no more injustice? Would all the brokenness of human existence dissolve away to prepare the way for a new heaven and a new earth? These are the things for which we might hope during Advent, suspended as we are between Jesus' first coming and his second coming. We are already saved, and yet still we dwell in brokenness. But our Advent hopes are well-founded, because it is into the brokenness of this in-between time that God breaks in—not at this precise moment in history as a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes or a glorified judge who tears

open the heavens—but already now into *every* moment: as a Word that sustains us and a Bread that nourishes us; tearing us open through the suffering to which Mark’s gospel points; making us vulnerable enough to be freed from our fears so that we might live differently, right now, in the in-between time, as we wait.

*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.* And indeed, they already have: when that ancient child was wrapped in swaddling clothes, and across the globe each week when the bread is broken and the wine poured, and when campus ministry students gather to make bread and chili for the homeless, and when a silent kind gesture goes unnoticed, and when we pray, and when we repent of our sins, and when a child cries out as the lukewarm water dribbles down her forehead onto her face (as little Lashauna and Jayden will experience at our font during the second service this morning). Steadfast love and faithfulness have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed one another. And so we can cry, “Comfort, comfort” to those who sit in darkness, even while lamenting the darkness with those who suffer, even while repenting of our failures to alleviate the suffering of those around us, even while hoping that God will bring something better out of this broken world.

I kept thinking this week about that Catholic student who suggested that all Lutherans are depressed, and as I thought about depressed Lutherans my mind was drawn to the coast of Jutland in northern Denmark. In Jutland, the winter days are short and the landscape is stark. Jutland is the location where Soren Kierkegaard’s father once cursed God from a grassy heath and then feared that he had lost his salvation; it is a dark and wintry place which seems to be caught in a perpetual Advent. But this same barren Jutland coast is also the setting of the film version of Isak Dinesen’s fictional story

*Babette's Feast*, and it is in this story, during a dinner feast of Eucharistic proportions, that one of the characters suddenly catches a glimpse of the infinite nature of grace, and he stands up and says these words to the other dinner guests:

Mercy and truth, my friends, have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another. [Humans . . . are] frail and foolish. We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and short-sightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite. For this reason we tremble. We tremble before making our choice in life, and after having made it again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace . . . makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another!<sup>1</sup>

This is the vision that lies at the end of our Advent waiting, and to which John the Baptist perpetually calls us. It's about a God whose grace is even more abundant than we can imagine. This grace is the salvation of the Psalmist and the hope of Isaiah: return from exile; repentance from sin; and it rests in a Word that became flesh and proclaims *Comfort, comfort*. When righteousness and peace shall kiss; where righteousness is at home—that is where we find ourselves, both now and in the future. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> "Babette's Feast," in *Babette's Feast and Other Anecdotes of Destiny*, Isak Dinesen (Vintage: New York, 1958), 40-41.