November 27, 2022 ~ The Story of HOPE

I speak to you on this Sunday of Advent in the name of our God of HOPE. Amen.

I hope you enjoyed the 9 Lessons and Carols. It is a meaningful way to begin this new Christian year and the Christian season of Advent, the 4 weeks before Christmas.

You will notice that we decorate our church for Advent and I know that many of you are decorating your homes too. I have put up our outdoor decorations and I will turn them on this evening as a celebration of the new church year. I bought a gold sleigh and two prancing reindeer from Canadian Tire and then realized I had to spend an hour putting them together. I hope they stay standing!!

Advent is not a penitential Christan season like Lent but is a season of waiting and of preparation. At St. Paul’s, our Advent colour is blue, which is the colour associated with Mary. There was a time when Christians did not decorate until Christmas but now many Christians, including myself, decorate during Advent to remind us that God surrounds us with God’s light and that there is meaning in the waiting. There are Advent gifts to be received in the waiting.

The 9 Lessons and Carols reviews God’s story and reminds us of God’s promises and hope, all culminating in the birth of our Saviour Jesus.

Stories are significant and I know that you have your own family stories that have shaped you. Here’s one of my favourite family stories. This is about the Nelson Family that I was born into. I come from a long line of bookworms and I was raised surrounded by books and by people reading. My mother had one firm rule though ~ no books at the dinner table. One of our favourite family activities was to sit together in the living room, each in companionable silence with our own book and no talking. In the summertime, we were wild and would do the very same thing but bring our books outdoors. It made my heart sing last summer to go into our cottage screen porch one warm evening and see our son Paul, his wife Crystal and their two daughters, Clara and Daphne sitting or lying on a couch and all quietly reading. The Nelson story continues.

Our biblical story begins in a garden with a moment of glory. We can only dream of this time. God is walking in a garden with a cool evening breeze. There is freedom and there is peace. God is looking for his people but they are hiding in shame. They have disobeyed God and eaten of the one tree God told them to avoid. And they will be cursed and shunned and return to dust.

We then move to a promise of God speaking with Abraham and blessing him. Abraham listened to the voice of God, believed and obeyed him. God tells Abraham that *Your offspring will be as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.* This is a message of hope.

The promises of hope become stronger with the prophets. Isaiah prophesies of the coming Messiah. A child would be born. A child would come with authority and peace. He would be wonderful. The darkness would be over. The child would be filled with wisdom and might and live a life of righteousness. The whole earth would be blessed and we would all receive our salvation.

The words of the prophets bring us more than a promise. They bring us hope. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Zephaniah.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of a new day, a day when God will write a new law and put the law on our hearts. All will know the Lord and all will love the Lord. And we will all be God’s people.

The prophet Micah reminds us the Lord asks for us to do 3 things:

1. Do justice
2. Love kindness and
3. Walk humbly with our God

The prophet Zephaniah sings a song of joy. God is in our midst and gathering us together as a family of faith. God is rejoicing over us with gladness. He will save us and bless us. What a message of promise and of hope.

Then we continue with the biblical story of our salvation with two gospel passages, one from Luke and one from John.

The angel Gabriel visits Mary who is living in Nazareth and tells her that the Lord is with her and that she will give birth to a holy child. Gabriel calls Mary “Favoured one.” Mary’s courage is inspirational as she immediately agrees, even though she knows that giving birth to a child outside of marriage is a death sentence and she could be stoned to death. Instead she cries out to Gabriel, “let it be with me according to your word.”

The ultimate promise of hope comes in John’s gospel where the darkness is truly gone. Jesus is the light of the world then and now. He came to earth to be the true light, the light that blesses every one of us. The light of our salvation. The light of grace and of truth and of hope.

I encourage you to reflect upon your own story and your family’s story. Notice and thank God for the good things. Remember that there is always light after darkness. I think about the words of Ecclesiastes, “For everything there is a season.”

I will close with the words of our patron saint Paul that he wrote in his letter to Christians in Rome:

“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.” Romas 15:13

A timeless message. The message of hope. Go home today and light your first Advent candle. Think of God breaking through the darkness and lifting you up and blessing you with hope. An ultimate Advent gift.

Amen.