

“WORDS FOR ADVENT”

Luke 1:26-38

December 3, 2006, The First Sunday of Advent

Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

This year’s litany for the Advent Candles mentions the year of Jubilee. Jewish law said that every 7th year the fields were to lie fallow. It was a time for the earth to heal, kind of like the 7th day of the week, the Sabbath, when people are renewed to themselves through resting. If God required rest after six days of creation, surely we must need rest. Something to think about with 22 days left before Christmas.

When it came the 7th x 7 years, the Jubilee year was proclaimed. The 50th year meant more than just fields left to renew themselves; it meant prisoners were released (a blanket pardon), debts were forgiven, and land that had been confiscated through foreclosures was returned to the original owners or their families. The Jubilee year meant that people had something to hope for. God would indeed intervene. Despair was not a life sentence; at least every 50 years there would come Jubilee.

When Jesus preached his first sermon as recorded in the gospel of Luke, he preaches that the year of Jubilee has come. The congregation thought he couldn’t count right! Jesus said: “I say it’s Jubilee now. You don’t have to wait. Today is the day of salvation.” They thought he was blasphemous--too full of himself. But the very reason that today we hope is not because we’re waiting for the 7th year to come or even 7 x 7 years, but because Jesus HAS come and he is our Jubilee. He is our redeemer. Jesus makes it even reasonable for us to dare to hope in the present time.

What do you hope for this year? Do you hope to be healed? Do you hope to be reunited with a family member or to be forgiven by someone? Do you hope for a different future--to get unstuck from your present circumstance? Do you hope to make a difference in the world in a new or different way? Do you hope to graduate, start a new job, find peace in your heart or perhaps even the world. (Notice I’m not asking what you hope to get with the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day.)

Hope is different than acquisition; hope is a spirit thing. Hope brings liberation, freedom; it’s like being born again to a new reality filled with possibilities yet unseen. And hope is not all about me. Hope is about a reality that is much bigger than my small corner of the world; although that has its importance in the web of relationships that make up God’s entire creation.

It is appropriate that on the Sunday when we celebrate hope we place our mission angels on the Christmas tree. We take an action to demonstrate our hope and God’s hope for the world. The mission angels began before I came to this church, and I hope will continue for many years to come.

Three organizations are chosen as recipients of our Christmas angels. One of these has always been Pilgrim Place. I asked Lisa Kopanke who started this tradition why Pilgrim Place was chosen; and she told me that she has always had a special place in her heart for

those who've given their life's work to the service of God. Pilgrim Place was started in 1915 as a home for retired missionaries returning to the states. Many had lived on very small salaries and had no equity in a home. Today there's a variety of church workers residing at Pilgrim Place. Some have assets they bring to their retirement; others do not. No one is rejected on the basis of financial status. Last Thursday I had lunch with Bill Cunitz, the executive director of Pilgrim Place, and a good friend to this church. He helped us in our visioning process that led to "This Old Church" campaign which has resulted in a lot of work done on this church during the past year. At lunch Bill told me that each year financial aide for residents who need it reaches \$250,000 or more. Pilgrim residents continue to minister even in retirement as demonstrated within this faith community.

The second organization to receive this year's mission angels is the Inland Valley Council of Churches. Their mission is integrally tied to ours through our satellite food center. But the council does much more than just give food. It provides shelter, counseling, and job training.

The third place our mission angels will fly this year is Africa, particularly Darfur and Burkina Faso. I talked a couple of weeks ago about the terrible genocide in Darfur. On the Bulletin board there is more information about this area located in the country of Sudan. Through our angels we offer our prayers for hope for the people of Darfur who are being murdered, raped, and driven from their homes every day. Cher Snyder has shared with us about the people of Burkina Faso through the work in which she and her Dad have participated. Yet this year has been particularly devastating. Floods have destroyed homes and people need tents to protect them from the cold, and now bird flu has arrived there.

The needs are great but our mission angels have power. Today our offering of money and our angels we place on the tree represent our hope for the world. If you can't comfortably make it to the tree, raise your hand and we will help. Then as we hope for the birth of Christ which brings with it our Jubilee, you are invited to donate \$5 per angel to send it flying to its destination so that our hope becomes hope for the world. Several of these angels show up with notes in each of our daughters' stockings on Christmas morning.

Father John Westerhoff tells the story of an inner city church in an industrial city which no longer had a congregation large enough to sustain it. The episcopal diocese was to decide whether to sell the building. One day while walking the streets around the old church, the priest saw an old lady burdened down with bags holding her entire life's belongings. He stopped to talk with her, and he asked her, "See that old church." The lady says, "Yep." The priest continued, "Has that church done anything for you?" The lady says, "Yep." "Well, what has that church done for you?" The old lady replied, "It gives me hope. When I look up and it's still there, I have hope."

God willing, our mission angels will give a glimmer of hope to the world, and this Advent may we live knowing that hope is not a distant reality, for Jesus says the Jubilee year is right now, today. May we, with God's help, make it so! Amen.