

As we celebrate the first Advent of our Lord Jesus, come as a baby in a manger, we live in anticipation of his ultimate victory over sin, death, and the devil when he comes again in glory. This morning we're going to explore what this means to us in our walk with God and with one another.

## OPENING PRAYER

In Isaiah, we read, **Isaiah 35:8-10, A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. <sup>9</sup> No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. <sup>10</sup> And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.**

One day the Lord will have final victory over evil, he will restore creation, the Lord will come again and **"the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy.**

Indeed, that day has already come! In the Gospel, Jesus responded to John the Baptist's question about who he was, saying, **Matthew 11:4-6, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have Good News preached to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by Me."**

Our physical brokenness is a sign of our broken relationship with God. When Jesus healed people, he was showing them that God had visited his creation and was removing the curse of sin and restoring people to a right relationship with him.

Jesus said about John the Baptist, **Matthew 11:10, "This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your Way before You."**

The Way John prepared for Jesus was “**the Way of Holiness,**” as spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. By that way Jesus would lead people closer to God through repentance and forgiveness, the way of complete restoration of our relationship with the Lord God Almighty.

When Jesus comes again, he will complete this work, fulfilling all God’s promises, administering God’s justice and pouring down God’s mercy, ushering in a new heaven and earth. But he’s already paved the way for us to follow in his stead until he comes again. That’s what James was talking about in his epistle, that is, how we might follow Christ, continuing to prepare the way of the Lord.

For example, James wrote, **James 5:7-8a, “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup> You also, be patient.”**

James’ spiritual barometer is “**patience.**” He used the word four times plus the word “**steadfast,**” which he used twice, and he used the word “**wait,**” which he used once with the illustration of the patient farmer waiting for his crops to mature. And he also used the word, “**grumbling,**” which is the opposite of waiting patiently.

When James tells us that we are like a farmer who waits for “the precious fruit of the earth,” he was saying we should not be in a hurry for the Lord’s second coming, for there are many more souls yet to redeem. St. Peter wrote, **2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”**

The Lord is patient with us for the sake of our salvation, thus we should also be patient concerning His promise to come again, busy with the work He’s given us to do, sharing the Good News with others which he shared with us so graciously. This is the Way of Holiness.

James also wrote, **James 5:8b-10, “Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. <sup>10</sup> As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”**

Our hearts are already established in the things of God, namely, his salvation and the promise of eternal life. Thus we should grow in our relationship with each other. That's what James was saying. No judging, but loving and accepting one another. No naysaying, but encouraging one another in the work the Lord has entrusted us with.

When I was in Philadelphia I was a layman in a church which was an historical landmark. It was a beautiful, neo-gothic masterpiece. The church also had a great music program; a professor from a local conservatory was on the payroll. Every year the congregation met to approve a budget for the church, and every year there was a financial crunch, for the building program to maintain this ancient structure and the music program were both very expensive. One year money was so tight one of the program's was going to take a cut in its budget. After much arguing, yelling and screaming and even name calling and cursing—all during a congregational meeting in the sanctuary after worship—there was a vote. The music program won; the building program would take the budget cut. The music people jumped up, cheered and gave each other high-fives, and the building people scowled as they lurked away silently.

Philadelphia, the city of brotherly shove.

If I'd been a visitor to this parish, an unbeliever, what would I have taken away from witnessing this meeting? That's a rhetorical question. For we know I never would've returned.

Consider how the way we work together directly affects our outreach. If the people of the church are devouring one another with gossip and snide comments and secret agendas, effectively sharing the work of Christ with unbelievers is quite impossible. But there is another way: The Way of Holiness.

James wrote, **James 5:11, “Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”**

Sometimes we use Job to illustrate a person's patience, as in, “That woman has the patience of Job, for I couldn't live with that man!”

But that isn't what James meant at all. The story of Job is about how God allowed Satan to take Job to the very edge of despair with the loss of his family, his work, and his

health to test his faith. Indeed, the only thing Job had left besides the life he clung to by a thread was a wife who encouraged him to “curse God and die!” (Thank you very much.) And then there were his 3-friends who told him it was all his fault, that he must have secret sins God was punishing him for. (Thank you VERY, VERY much!)

What Job’s patience was about was trusting God, putting himself under His lordship, allowing God to be God and to call the shots, even if it meant suffering.

So too we suffer. Each one of us has our own list of complaints, valid complaints, indeed, reasons we’d prefer to be in heaven than on earth. Consider St. Paul who said, **Philippians 1:21-24: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup>If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. <sup>23</sup>I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. <sup>24</sup>But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.”**

Paul was a funny guy, talking as if he could choose the day he would die, and that his decision hinged on whether or not the church prospered or not! But he made a point: While we’re here on this planet, we do the work God’s given us to do even in the midst of suffering. This is the Way of Holiness.

James was teaching us to be witnesses of Christ’s work through our relationships one with another. You love God? So love each other. You are patient with God’s promise to come again? So be patient with one another. Amidst your suffering, you wait on the Lord with the patience of Job? So suffer the assaults of other people and be patient with them, for the Lord is preparing a place in heaven for them too. This is how Jesus’ work of redemption continues among us.

Personal example: My divorce was the worst time in my life. The process drug out for years including counseling and marriage counseling. Frankly, there were times when I didn’t know if I was going to survive it, emotionally, vocationally, spiritually, or physically. But I did, and the result was a better pastor. I’ve found in my heart great compassion and empathy for others who suffer through this kind of brokenness. I would never wish it on anyone. I don’t recommend it. But divorce happens, and when it does, I am able to love and strengthen others in the same way my Lord Jesus loved and strengthened me. This is the Way of Holiness, letting the work the Lord has done in us be a means for our ministry one to another. This is the way you and I should walk with one another between now and eternity.

Friends in Christ, this week as we meditate on Christ's first advent as a baby in a manger, let us remember that he will come again for you and me. Be encouraged, be strengthened by his promise. This is our first step on the Way of Holiness.

This week may we have the patience of Job, knowing that all things work together for good for those who love and trust the Lord. This too is the Way of Holiness.

This week may we grow in patience with our fellow parishioners, building one another up in love, for this is the Way of Holiness.

And this week may our hearts be established, filled with conviction and confidence, sharing the Good News with our neighbors, for the Lord is coming again soon. This is the Way of Holiness. Amen.