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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT

December 15, 2019

Third Sunday of Advent, Year A

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

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

Shortly after Eric and I moved here about 4 years ago, there were two articles side by side on the front page of the News-Argus. One lamented the many empty store fronts on Main Street and recalled the days when there was a more robust business in the community. This article quoted folks who thought we needed to try a different form of government. Maybe having a mayor to lead us, rather than a city manager and city commission, would bring new life to our town.

Next to that article was the announcement that there was a grass-roots effort starting up to brainstorm ideas that would bring both businesses and visitors to Lewistown as well as provide better service to our local community. These folks were excited to have a consultation group come in to facilitate the process of imagining and then implementing projects that would appeal to various ages and needs in the area.

These two philosophies for renewing the community can also be seen in the ways people view faith in God. Sometimes we want God to come and deliver us. We are lost, afraid, fed up, drained of ideas or energy or hope. We cannot pull ourselves up by our boot straps because our boots are worn out and the straps have fallen off. We need someone to lift us up. We can't even imagine asking for strength. We just want God to do for us whatever it is we need.

Sometimes God does work that way. We still hear about miracles today. The accident that almost happened but didn't. The scan that showed cancer one day but wasn't there the next time. The baby that wasn't supposed to live who grew to be a thriving adult.

We confess that God's power to heal and give life is at work in the world and we rejoice when we can both recognize that power and give witness to it.

Sometimes God works for renewal and healing in other ways—in communities, over longer periods of time, through the feeble efforts of human beings who are still learning to trust that God has gifted them to serve God's good purposes in the world.

It is harder to recognize God at work in ourselves or in those we know, especially when it is much easier to name our faults and failings than how we have grown or changed for the better over time and by God's grace.

In the passage from Isaiah today, God's people are on the cusp of being taken into exile by another nation. They were about to become a pitiful remnant of the nation that had once entered the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. The hope of rebuilding one day seemed impossible as threats of being overthrown grew stronger.

To these worried, desperate people Isaiah brings God's word of encouragement. "Here is your God." God is here among you, giving you the strength of body, mind, and spirit you need to move forward—even in this difficult time.

God will give your eyes the vision to see a new way. God will open your ears to hear God's voice of encouragement and direction. God will fill your body with a new way to move into a new future. God will give you a voice to tell what God is up to and to sing God's praises.

In the first several chapters of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is enacting Isaiah's vision of God's promised future. This is not exactly how John the Baptist imagined Jesus, the Messiah, bringing in God's kingdom. There seems to be doubt behind his question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus' response is his way of saying, "Here is your God—bringing sight to the blind, making the lame walk, cleansing the lepers, raising the dead, and bringing good news to the poor."

We, too, might have doubt or confusion about how God is working renewal in our lives. The one who becomes paralyzed in an accident expects God to make him walk again. Instead, God works in his heart to become a champion for others who have experienced similar injuries.

Those who are not able to hear, come to see their deafness as part of who they are rather than as a deficit in their lives. As an elder person loses her sight, she comes to appreciate the sounds and smells and textures of the world around her in new ways.

Our physical or emotional ailments are not how God wants us to live. But through them God might be saying to us, "Here is your God." In the trials of life God brings something new—a new way of living and loving and proclaiming God's goodness and hope. There will be a day when all will be made new.

When the blind see, the lame walk, the sick are whole, and all people will know the life and love of God in its fullness.

Even as we wait with hope for the day of Christ's return and the completion of God's kingdom come, we continue to place our hope in God's power to bring renewal in our lives day by day. As we wait, Jesus calls us to look around, to see how God is at work even now, and to proclaim with joy, "Here is your God!"

Four years ago, I was excited to see how Lewistown would be revitalized. I'm sure there were many of us who couldn't have imagined a new skate park, a new amphitheater, a remodeled swimming pool facility complete with a splash park and tube slides.

Now there are updated apartments and office spaces on the upper floors of several buildings on Main Street, new businesses have opened, and eventually a fitness pool will be inside one of them! Who would have imagined that?!

The intersection west of town has been reworked to be more clear, the walking trails in and around town have been improved and expanded, and very soon our soccer kids will have new fields to play on.

All this was not the work of one person, one savior to lead our town to new life. But there is a common spirit of hope and possibility that is leading this transformation.

How might God be at work in our congregation in similar ways? How might we need to have our eyes and ears opened to serve the needs in our community? How can we be bolder about bringing good news to the poor?

We are named Zion, the name God's ancient people gave to both a mountain and a city where they went to be with and worship God. As God's people in this place and time, we are sent from here to proclaim the hope and promise we have received to a world in need of God's life and grace.

Our mission as God's people is to proclaim to the world, "Here is your God!"

Let us give witness to what we have seen and heard, and that means pausing to take notice! How has God carried us through a difficult time? How have we learned a new way of living or interacting with others?

Even as we struggle, are we stronger than we were before? Who does God send to be encouragers, supporters, and companions on our journeys?

Tell those stories of God's goodness.

The world is yearning to hear the good news, "Here is your God!"

Thanks be to God. Amen