

Grace and peace to you.

How many times have you heard this gospel preached as a stewardship sermon? Look at the poor widow, who gave despite her poverty – she is praised for her generosity, which is certainly praiseworthy, but is that what Jesus is pointing out to us? Are we supposed to focus solely on the widow’s mite, to set the righteous poor up on a pedestal (where they are in danger of falling from OUR good graces if they don’t continue to behave in ways we consider righteous or graceful)? What does it look like, if instead of approaching this passage of scripture from a preconceived perspective of financial giving, from the context of Fall Giving Drives and pledge cards, what if we REALLY pay attention to Jesus? What if we remember that we are anxiously waiting for his imminent arrival and return? What if we engage in the “already-but-not-yet” perspective of Advent?

On this weekend following the 2024 general election, as parts of our community are celebrating the results, and other parts of our community despair what those results will mean; on this weekend which is bookend by the anniversary of Kristallnacht (remembering the devastation of a particular night, along with all the horrors of the anti-Jewish, anti-queer, anti-disability extermination campaigns in Nazi Germany) last night, and our nation’s annual commemoration of Veteran’s Day on Monday (originally celebrated as Armistice Day or Remembrance Day, to celebrate the end of fighting the Great War – the war to end all wars, which of course has not stopped humankind from slaughtering one another, so we mark Veteran’s Day once a year to remember the human cost, at least the cost to service (wo)men who fight these wars for us); on this weekend, this Sunday, what does it mean to look at the scripture and the world around us through the lens of Advent?

The Advent Devotional we are using on Wednesdays uses the theme, “More than Words.” Some traditions assign a word to each Sunday in Advent, a word for each candle on the wreath, so the folks at Barn Geese Worship settled on three more words so that we’d have seven words for seven candles, for seven Sundays. You know, I just thought of another lovely connection we can make in extending our Advent season: the number seven (as in the seven days of Creation) is a lovely reminder that God is at work, recreating the world, entering this world of flesh and blood, of broken glass and broken promises not as a king or military general, but in a poor, hungry, fragile, human body.

Our word for this week is “Care.” We sang with the children as we lit the first candle: “He (Jesus) came down that we may have care; hallelujah, forever more!” Not just 2,000 years ago, but forever more. What does “care” look like on the Sunday after a heated election, the morning after Kristallnacht, the day before Veteran’s day? What does “care” look like for the widow?

In our first reading, God sent Elijah, both to be cared for and to provide care to the Widow of Zarephath. She had spent her last coins, and was ready to tell Elijah, no, I have nothing left to

give you. Somehow, she trusted his promise that God would provide. Perhaps the widow in our gospel passage remembers this story, and trusts that God would provide as she places her last coins in the offering plate in the Temple. We don't know what happens next in this case. Is there a jug of oil or jar of flour in her kitchen that never runs out? Maybe a neighbor, or adult children and in-laws take pity on this widow, left powerless without a husband, we can hope that the community cares for this widow.

Jesus points out the injustice and hypocrisy of the religious system, which accepts the widow's two little coins, whether we sneer at the small gift, or place the giver on a pedestal.

Either option is perilous for her, the person we call the widow. Either she's already fallen from grace in shame for her small offering, or, as soon as we no longer wish to idolize her generosity, she risks the fall from the lofty place where we pigeonholed her.

We can hope that God provides care for the widows and others we pigeonhole in various ways here in Libby and at Christ Lutheran Church. Hope is certainly part of Advent, so is waiting. But what kind of waiting? What kind of hope? Advent expectation is not about sitting on our hands to keep ourselves from opening Christmas presents early. Advent expectation is more like being so captured by hope that we start doing what we hope God will do, because we can't sit on our hands any more – because we love Jesus so much that we care for the widow, and the veteran, and our Jewish and LGBTQ+ and disabled neighbors because we just can't help ourselves! And then, kind of like Elijah, maybe we realize that God is working through us, that God has been with us, transforming the world all along.

That's our mission here, together, right? To joyfully welcome, accept, serve and witness to all people, not because we have all the answers or always know how to do the right thing, but because we have been freed by the gospel, the good news, of God's grace. So, as we begin our Advent, yes early, instead of worrying how you will fit extra candles into your Advent wreath, or if you even want to bother with extra candles, we turn to Jesus. His care for us all, first and foremost the most vulnerable: the widows, orphans, immigrants, and outsiders, and invitation to the wealthy, powerful, and prestigious to let go of what binds us, and to care. To care for ourselves and our neighbors – all of our neighbors. To allow others to care for us. Dr. Lilla Watson credited the aboriginal rights group she worked amongst for forming this motto: "If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." The rich and the poor, the powerful and crushed, the right and the left are all essential to God's work in the world, the fulfillment of which we expectantly await each Advent season.

Why advent? Why now? Because God is calling us to be bound up in generosity and liberation and God's unending, steadfast love, together with the poor widow and the hypocritical religious people, and the Season of Advent points us there so very well.