

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our readings today are preparing us for Advent, the season which begins the week after next. They all have a strong Advent theme. There's a sense of foreboding in each of these readings. The Daniel reading speaks of a time of anguish such has never occurred since the nations first came into existence. The Hebrews reading, our epistle, ends with a reminder that the day is approaching. And our gospel speaks of wars and rumors of wars. Nation will rise against nation, Jesus says. There will be earthquakes in various places. There will be famines. The great temple in Jerusalem will be thrown down. And all this must happen, as the end is still to come.

The season of Advent reminds us that this world is not all that there is. There will be a time of reckoning and judgment, when God will act to make all things new. And that great, dark day will be an end and also a beginning, as God restores His new creation.

Advent is an uncomfortable season. It's there to encourage us not to get too comfortable in this world, which we know is only passing away ... which is not our final home. Advent reminds us to live our lives in the light of the coming Kingdom. It reminds us, as St. Paul says, that our commonwealth is in Heaven, from whence we await a Savior.

On my first readings of the lessons for today I identified with the anguish that there is in those readings. We've had to deal in recent weeks with a significant amount of loss and death in our church community. We've lost a number of much loved and longstanding members, just in the last two days. There's been over 800 people in the church for two large funerals. Yesterday we had a service for Herman Froeb, a member here for decades, and on Friday we had a poignant service for Karen Carter, someone I knew well, who was my age, who was a very popular teacher at Bishop's School. Journeying with her family through the battle with

cancer was a stark reminder of what anguish really means ... what it can look like.

This world is full of great joy and searing loss. And for the first time in my ministry these last week or two, I've actually felt emotionally depleted, that I've run out of those emotional resources one needs for pastoral ministry. And yet, as I read the readings again for the second and for the third time, I noticed that even each of these seemingly dark passages has grounds for hope.

In Daniel, we find one of the very few references in the Old Testament to everlasting life. It says, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky." And in the gospel, Jesus encourages his hearers not to be alarmed. The pain and anguish is not the last word. It is not the end. It is merely the beginning of the birth pains. What is being birthed is God's glorious new Kingdom. And in the epistle from Hebrews, there's a reminder that as the day approaches we can have both confidence and assurance, and we can have the experience of entering the very sanctuary of God's presence. The writer says, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who has promised is faithful."

Anguish and hope, these are the twin Advent themes, the poles around which the season of Advent unfolds. We're called to hold them together. If we're overcome with anguish, we end up in despair. If we escape into some ethereal, dreamy hope, we can end up being blind to the suffering of this world.

The choir is singing a beautiful anthem later, "Steal Away," which comes out of the African-American experience of slavery. And that's a song which can't help but speak of anguish but also retains that strong hope of Heaven.

So I want to say something more about confidence, the confidence which is spoken about in that reading from Hebrews. Confidence seems

important if we're to navigate between these twin poles of anguish and hope. The writer says this, "Therefore my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith." Confidence and faith here seem to be almost interchangeable. We can come with confidence before God. But it's not a confidence in ourselves. It's not a confidence that we've achieved the requisite level of holiness to be accepted. Rather, it's a confidence that's based on the ability of Jesus Christ to lead us into God's presence. The confidence, the faith of which the writer speaks, isn't a noun. It's a verb. He doesn't say have confidence that we can approach God's throne. He says, let us approach the throne of God with confidence.

Faith is a verb. It's a doing word. It's something we do rather than something that we have. Faith doesn't just think something is possible, it does it. And that's why I like that wonderful story in the gospels of the hemorrhaging woman who battles her way to Jesus through the crowds because she wants just to touch the hem of His garment. When Jesus turns to her after she does that and she's healed, He says, "Your faith has healed you." And He's referring there not to a kind of faith that thinks if only I touch the hem of His garment things will be okay. It's the kind of faith which fights its way through the crowd, reaches out, and touches the hem of Jesus's garment.

Faith isn't jumping to conclusions, it's concluding to jump. That woman came ... she can be an example to us of her faith. Her confidence in Jesus meant she didn't stay amongst the crowd. She stepped out in faith. She had a stirring in her heart and she did something about it. She acted in faith, which is something which could speak to all of us. We're familiar with the need to build our self-confidence. We hear that all the time. But how do we build our God-confidence ... our faith ... our confidence in God?

And we need to ask that question because faith needs to be nurtured. We can grow in faith. Faith is

like a muscle: the more you use it, the stronger it gets. We can start by trusting God for small things. We grow in faith as we move on from thinking that prayer might be rather a nice idea to actually praying ... when we have enough confidence in God's existence to invest time being with Him, speaking to Him, listening, praying.

We all know where we are with regard to faith, how confident we are, and where the places are that we need to conclude to jump. We're all at different places, but the important thing is that we're all moving forward in faith, that we're making those jumps, and growing in God-confidence. The Bible is clear that God is a sure grounds for hope ... that He who promises can be trusted. Our faith in Him is well founded. We can be confident in God.

Confidence enables us to steer a path through this world with its pain and its sadness. We endure the anguish of this world confident of the hope which is set before us.

Amen.