

## Isaiah 65:17-25

<sup>17</sup> For I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind.

<sup>18</sup> But be glad and rejoice forever  
in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
and its people as a delight.

<sup>19</sup> I will rejoice in Jerusalem,  
and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,  
or the cry of distress.

<sup>20</sup> No more shall there be in it  
an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

<sup>21</sup> They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

<sup>22</sup> They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

<sup>23</sup> They shall not labor in vain,  
or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—  
and their descendants as well.

<sup>24</sup> Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.

<sup>25</sup> The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!

They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
says the Lord.

## 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

6 Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. <sup>7</sup>For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup>and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that

we might not burden any of you. <sup>9</sup>This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. <sup>10</sup>For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. <sup>11</sup>For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. <sup>12</sup>Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. <sup>13</sup>Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

## Luke 21:5-19

5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, <sup>6</sup>'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'

7 They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' <sup>8</sup>And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them.

9 'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; <sup>11</sup>there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

12 'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.

<sup>13</sup>This will give you an opportunity to testify. <sup>14</sup>**So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; <sup>15</sup>for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.** <sup>16</sup>You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. <sup>17</sup>You will be hated by all because of my name. <sup>18</sup>But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup>**By your endurance you will gain your souls.**

### 1. Testify to Righteousness

We begin a new worship series today for extended Advent. Advent is a season of the Christian year that prior to the 11<sup>th</sup> century was a 7 week observance but since then was reduced to four weeks, with Christmas following the fourth week. Unfortunately, in our culture, Santa and all the trappings of Christmas have not only overshadowed the Advent season; they've distorted its meaning to be all about the approach of Mary and Joseph to the stable in Bethlehem, and it's only a matter of time before you see Santa Claus standing with his bag of presents adoring an excited little Christ child in the manger, with Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer standing in the wings.

And so I want to re-emphasize the true meaning of the Advent Season, and hopefully by lengthening it and focusing us on that message we'll not only prevent Advent from being completely secularized but experience an even greater joy than we may get from the parties and the presents that the holiday season offers us. Because the true meaning of Advent is about *The Coming of God's Kingdom* which started with the FIRST coming of Jesus over 2,000 years ago and will be consummated at his SECOND coming.

Our anchoring verse for this worship series is 1 John 4:8: "***Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.***"

**Love** is what truly characterizes God's reign, and it's what characterizes the Christian, who is being transformed into the image of God and who testifies to the love of God through everything we think or say or do. And as we testify through thought, word, and deed, the world IS transformed, maybe more on a local scale than on a global scale, but the transformation does occur, and Advent is about looking forward to that day when the transformation is complete, both within us and around us.

So how do we testify to love? Well there's more to it than telling people, "Jesus loves you." In fact that phrase can actually be the opposite of a testimony to love; I know some Christians who, when a person really annoys them, will declare "Jesus loves you" with the connotation being "Jesus loves you, AND I DON'T." No, your testimony to God's love is hardly persuasive if that love is not manifest in YOU. As I mentioned, testifying to love involves your entire being which is evident in what you say and what you do which hopefully reflect the way you think (it's pretty hard to keep up the impression of loving if you don't indeed *feel* love in your heart). But what are the different ways we testify to love?

One way is by testifying to righteousness. That's what we'll focus on today, and all three of our scripture passages will help illustrate this. Let's start with the epistle lesson. Paul was, by anyone's assessment, a man of word of deed, a man of action. He traveled around TESTIFYING to Jesus Christ, forming little churches wherever he went, and writing letters to those churches whenever they seemed to be losing their way. And I chose this passage because he warns against IDLENESS. The Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit as being active and flowing (the Hebrew word for "spirit," *ruhah*, also means "breath" or "wind."). Christians and churches should not be idle, and using love as a means of measurement, that love should be flowing from you to those around you like a stream of living water, cooling the overheated world around you. We should not, as Paul puts it, "be weary in doing what is right," which is nothing more than testifying to RIGHTEOUSNESS.

It's not about SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS. I've seen that far too often – the Christian who is only thoughtful of curbing their own unrighteousness in behavior, and these folks get so wrapped up in themselves that I dare say the love of God has no place in their hearts. They end up judging others while basking in their own righteousness which is an illusion because you can't pursue true righteousness apart from God's love.

And righteousness should be understood not individually but GLOBALLY, AS WORLD-RIGHTEOUSNESS. That's what the kingdom of God is all about; it's about the WORLD coming under Christ's reign – that's what got Paul in trouble; he was proclaiming Jesus, not Caesar, to be Lord and Savior. He testified to God's empire, not the Roman empire. Advent is about that coming kingdom of righteous love that our Old Testament lesson describes as one not where the wolf devours the lamb, but where "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together." You can't have such a kingdom unless the entire world changes and embraces a Kingdom based on peace and on justice – because what Isaiah was witness to, what Jesus was witness to, and what too many people are witness to, is a world where might makes right, where those with the bigger guns or the bigger fists devour the weak. Isaiah is standing and looking at the city of Jerusalem that has been devastated by the invading Babylonian army, a

people who are forced from their homes and made slaves to their captors, and he's looking ahead with an Advent spirit and saying, "It is not ALWAYS going to be this way; God is going to change things."

And Jesus warns us not to be deceived by all the nice things that we see around us. In our Gospel lesson we find Jesus strolling through a rebuilt Jerusalem with his disciples who are admiring the beauty of this great Temple, built mainly by slave labor under the rule of Herod the Great who was a puppet ruler for Rome, and Jesus is saying, "Don't be deceived." A lot of beautiful buildings were paid for in human lives. In the book *Mountains Beyond Mountains* the story is told of an American doctor and co-founder of Partners in Health, Paul Farmer, who married Didi Bertrand, a woman from Haiti. Because Doctor Farmer's work required him to travel all over the world, he and his family had an apartment in Paris. He relates a story of taking his wife to see all the beautiful buildings and artwork in Paris thinking that she would be so impressed, but what she saw was the suffering that her slave ancestors experienced on the sugar plantations at the hands of French colonial rule in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. Jesus saw the same suffering when he looked upon the Jerusalem Temple, which seemed more a reflection of man's glory than it was of God's glory.

God's glory is seen not in buildings but in brotherhood, not in armies but in relationships built on love. We testify to God's love when we advance the causes of justice, or righteousness, showing that we are ALL God's children. We live in a community where, as much as we like to complain, we have it pretty good. The temptation is to be complacent, to be idle, to ignore the plight of the needy and those who suffer from injustice. If the love of God truly dwells in us, we cannot sit idle.

We're now going to have an altar call. As the music plays, I ask you to pray, either at the altar, or in your pew, for God's love to move us all toward the pursuit of God's righteousness, to work toward the day when the wolf may feed with the lamb rather than ON the lamb, where the strong tend to the needs of the weak rather than preying upon the weak. Pray that it would begin in you, that it would be manifest in the ministries of this church, and that the Holy Spirit, the Holy WIND of God would help us to hold to the vision of Advent, the vision of the coming of God's Kingdom, through Jesus Christ. Amen.