

Holy Advent: Holy Keeping

Luke 1:68-79 & 1 Kings 8:22-26, 59-61

December 3, 2023

First Presbyterian, Luling

Though our congregation doesn't traditionally hold worship on Ash Wednesday, there's a line in the formal Ash Wednesday liturgy that calls out to me. It's part of the introduction before the imposition of ashes on worshippers' foreheads. It goes like this: "I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent." It goes on to list the aspects of a holy Lent: self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting, works of love, meditating on God's word.

Very well, you're probably thinking. But it isn't Lent. It's Advent, and we're preparing for Christmas, not for Easter. You are precisely correct. Advent and Lent are both seasons of preparation. We use purple paraments for both. The ancient church observed both as seasons for repentance, though a penitential Advent has all but disappeared. I expect we'll return to this idea of a holy Lent in a couple of months. A Holy Advent, though. What would it mean to observe a Holy Advent?

A holy Advent is first off, clearly and obviously, different than the "holiday shopping season" that has already been in full swing for well over a week. It's different than the whirlwind of events and parties that we might get swept up in. For the next three weeks leading up to Christmas Eve, we're going to look at a holy Advent from three different perspectives. Holy Keeping, Holy Pondering, and Holy Seeing. The characters from Luke's Christmas narratives will guide us.

Holy keeping. We were discussing this idea in the lectionary study with other pastors that I participate in. We were all over the place, and by the time we moved, we concluded that there's room for an entire book about the concept and language of "keeping" in the Bible. I'll try to keep it manageable, but rest assured that I could go on and on.

Three pieces of Scripture in our service today pull together with the idea that God is a holy keeper. God keeps promises. That's one of the characteristics that is so a part of God's very being that it is mentioned and described over and over in the Bible.

Let's start with the 1 Kings passage that Etta read. It's not one we hear very often. It takes place at the dedication of the Temple. There are chapters and chapters of instructions on exactly how to build the Temple, because the Temple will be a holy place. King Solomon prays at the Temple's dedication, and the main theme of his prayer is God's faithfulness in keeping promises. God keeps the

covenant with steadfast love. The prayer goes on, outlining the people's role in keeping their end of the covenant. After it concludes, Solomon asks God to again keep the covenant through Solomon and the line of King David. He then calls the people to devote themselves to the Lord, obeying—keeping—the commandments.

The interplay of different kinds of keeping is shown clearly in this passage. God keeps the divine promises from the covenant. The people, in turn, keep their part of the covenant. God is the keeper of promises, and the people are keepers of commandments. That's the covenant that underlies all of the Israelites' story, from Abraham to Jesus. Through generations of faithful and unfaithful people, God keeps the promises. God's holiness is reflected in the way God keeps promises.

Zechariah rehearses all of this history, in the second passage we read, from Luke. It's Zechariah's song on the occasion of the birth of his son, John the Baptist. He sings, "God has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets of old...Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham." Zechariah is invoking and bringing to the present, all of their collective memories of God's promises, and God's faithfulness to keeping those promises.

Then, like Solomon, he turns briefly to the people's role in keeping the covenant. God has kept promises, so that the people "may serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." Zechariah then turns toward the future, and these words are so beautiful, I'm going to read them again: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." That feels like a blessing our world, doesn't it? The keeper of promises isn't finished yet, and is bringing light and guiding us in the way of peace.

Holy keeping is God keeping promises with divine steadfast love, and faithfulness. And holy keeping is humans keeping covenant with stumbling, bumbling attempts at steadfast love and faithfulness. Holy keeping is perfect when God does it. And holy keeping is imperfect when we do it. We're humans, and God is merciful.

And that brings us to Psalm 121, which was our call to worship this morning. If left to my own choices, I frequently include this at funerals. It's one of my favorites, and holy keeping is all through it. He who keeps you will not slumber.

He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

The Lord is your keeper. God is a keeping God, not just keeping the covenant, but keeping you. When my brother and I were teenagers, especially, heading in seventeen different directions simultaneously, making questionable decisions on a regular basis, living in conditions some people might describe as “messy,” my mom would be heard to exclaim regularly, “You need a keeper!” I think she meant a zookeeper. The Lord is our keeper. Not always keeping us out of trouble, but right there when we stumble into it. The Lord is our keeper, never abandoning us, never turning aside from us, never giving up on us.

Holy keeping is God’s keeping. God keeping covenant, God keeping us, God loving us. Holy keeping is our keeping, messy though it may be sometimes, our keeping of God’s commandments to love.

To keep a holy Advent is the same. It is to keep God’s commandment to love, as we are being kept by God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Advent, to be kept by God, to keep God’s commandments, to love and be loved.