

The Prophecy Candle

Flames for the Faithful Series Rev. Michael J. Mattil

Listen! If the message of Advent could be expressed in only one word, that word might well be "listen." Especially if the message of the first candle on the Advent wreath had to be expressed in one word, that word would say it well: "Listen!" Like I told the children at the beginning of the service, as the first candle flickers, the Advent wreath is trying to get your attention. Listen!

The first candle on the wreath is sometimes called the **Prophecy Candle**. I know that when we hear the word "prophecy," most often we think about foretelling the future, and that is part of what today's message is all about--but only part of it. While God's prophets in ancient times did foretell the future now and then, that was not their primary task. Their primary task of a prophet was to preach, to proclaim, to speak the Word of God for the people of God. I had a professor who always said "The prophet was God's mouthpiece."

And if the prophets' job was to speak, it was the job of the people to **listen**. And there is that word again: Listen! Something we still need to do today. In preaching, prophecy continues to take place--right here, in this very church, week after week: God's Word is proclaimed for God's people. Jesus is proclaimed as the one who offered His perfect life as the sacrifice for all sins. That is prophecy. The job of a prophet is to speak God's Word for God's people. And that is still happening. Your job as God's people is to listen. The first candle on the Advent wreath calls you to do just that. The rest of the candles will continue to echo that call all through the season.

For example, the second candle on the wreath is called the **Bethlehem Candle**, for when the Word became flesh ("the Word"--what God has to say)--when the Word became flesh, it happened first at Bethlehem. The first time Jesus' human voice was heard, it rang out there at Bethlehem, a newborn voice, an infant cry, a baby trying to communicate. And that's worth listening to. For what the prophets long proclaimed, what ages and ages of faithful folk had waited for--for the Word of God to break the silence of the centuries and fill the world with hope--was happening at Bethlehem.

Was Bethlehem prepared? Are we? The light of prophecy is about to shine there anew, in those dark streets, to fill the world with hope. One wants to call out, "Listen, Bethlehem!"

The third candle on the Advent wreath, the pink one, is the **Shepherds' Candle**, and it also urges you to listen. For when the Word made flesh was first proclaimed ("the Word,"--what God had to

say)--it was shepherds who were chosen to hear good tidings of great joy, shepherds working the very hillsides where David had once tended his flock--the most famous shepherd of them all--and written his psalms, the Word of God in poetry, including one where that shepherd describes his Lord as one who lovingly tends a flock: "**The Lord is my shepherd.** I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, He restores my soul. He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the day of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

That was a psalm of David, the shepherd. And now a new song is about to be sung, a new message proclaimed by a heavenly chorus: the end of fear, beginning of joy; the prophets' promises fulfilled--in shepherds' terms: the Son of David coming in the name of the Lord, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Good Shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. And by that message the third candle seeks to turn your fear into joy. It is a message well worth hearing. Listen!

The fourth candle on the Advent wreath is the **Angels' Candle**. For when the Word became flesh ("the Word"--what God has to say), it was angels who were sent to say it ... to shepherds ... at Bethlehem--the Word of God proclaimed, fulfilled: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

Listen! That is the message as the first candle begins to glow, lighting the way to all the rest. Listen! For here in God's Word is a light that shines beyond the boundaries of Bethlehem, beyond the hillsides of the shepherds. He is the Word of God proclaimed for all the world to hear--a message of **HOPE**.

If you want another word to summarize the message of Advent, especially the first candle, that word could well be HOPE. The Bible very consciously connects HOPE with the Word of God:

Romans 15:4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

The biblical concept of HOPE means to have something to look forward to:

Titus 2:11-13 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,

The biblical concept of HOPE means to have something to look forward to:

Psalms 130:7 O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.

The biblical concept of HOPE means to have something to look forward to:

1 Peter 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

The biblical concept of HOPE means to have something to look forward to:

Romans 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Something to look forward to. A future! And what a future it is! That's what prophecy is all about, to help us be ready for the future--God's future! This is only the first candle; there is more to come of the grace of God, of the message of Advent, of the HOPE with which God brightens the way before us ... into the future, a future that promises to get brighter and brighter ... brighter than an Advent wreath, brighter than the Christmas star, as bright as heaven itself, where Advent wreaths will not be needed anymore, where "there is no need for sun or moon, for the glory of the Lord is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb of God."

Listen! You will hear the voice of prophecy, the Word of God for the people of God, the Advent message of HOPE.