

This Advent House

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: December 17, 2023

Readings

Isaiah 65.17-25

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5.12-28

John 3.22-30

Opening

Glory to God for new things! Glory to God for old things made new! The Lord spoke through his prophet, Isaiah, to Judah, 'Be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create.' God's people rejoice not only in his first creation; they rejoice in his *new* creations.

Seventeen years ago, our founding members walked into this building with our bishop. Our parish had not even been named Apostles yet. We were Anglicans planting a new church. Through the providence of God, Central Baptist Bearden offered space in this building that we would share with other ministries. Never forget, Anglican Christians, that Apostles would not be here without the invitation and sincere support of our Baptist brothers and sisters. Most church plants meet and set up chairs for years before they acquire a church of their own. The first time we ever set up chairs for worship was this last September in the Parish Hall, seventeen years after our founding members walked into this building the first time.

We give thanks to God for the first creation of this church building, for it gave us a holy place, a nave and sanctuary for worship from our earliest days. Be glad and rejoice in that which God creates first.

And today we have a new joy because our God is not only a God of first creation, he is the God of new creation. We gather in a Nave and Sanctuary that is a new creation, for the glory of God. Every year on the third Sunday of Advent, the Church commands her people across the world to rejoice. It is a command, an imperative—rejoice! Rejoice, always, says the Apostle Paul, and again, I say, rejoice! Gaudete! Across this world, created and loved by God, broken by sin, the Church rejoices in our God who is a God of new creation. Today we dedicate all that is new in this church so that all might be for his glory alone.

This day and always let our hearts be fixed on the prayer of Psalm 115. In a sign of providence, Psalm 115 was given yesterday in Morning Prayer to prepare our hearts for today: 'Not to us, O Lord, not to

us, but to your Name give glory, for the sake of your covenant love and your faithfulness!¹ Give glory to your Name when we sing hymns, songs, and spiritual songs to praise you here. Give glory to your Name, O Lord, whenever the Scriptures are read and the Gospel is proclaimed here. Give glory to your Name, O Lord, when new sons and daughters become new creations, baptized in water and Spirit in this place. Give glory to your Name, Lord, whenever you inhabit bread and wine to be the very presence of Christ offered to us here.

We are sons and daughters of God's new creation. Christians and churches ought to be making new things. But for what purpose? Not for us, not to us, not for the sake of our own tastes or desires. Not for any of these lesser things, but let your Name be glorified in the beauty of holiness, for your Name alone is worthy of our praise.

How do we inhabit this holy place? That is the meditation I have this morning. Earlier this morning we heard the Lord's promise spoken through Isaiah to Judah long ago, 'They shall build houses and inhabit them.'² In the providence of God, we return to this Nave in the holy season of Advent. This is no small sign for us. From many well over a year ago, when we prayerfully listened to God, discerning his purposes for this building, we had no sense of timeline. But God led us our hearts to focus on this holy place, and this new work is complete in Advent. What is God saying to us, not only in this place, but in this time? How do we inhabit this holy place? He is saying that his house at Apostles is an Advent house.

The Advent House(s)

Our story with God is still being written! We have stories from years past of God revealing his purposes and his will for us; how he clearly led us by his Holy Spirit to name our parish Apostles; how he called us to be a sending church, a mother church in Knoxville. His purposes for us are not only moments from the past, our story with God is being revealed to us in the present moment. Our Lord calls Apostles *forward*. And he's saying to us that he's calling his house at Apostles—even when the calendar turns to 2024, to 2034, to 2054—to be an Advent house of worship. We profess the mystery of faith, week after week, year after year: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ is coming again!

What does it mean for Apostles to have this Advent calling? It means that Christ calls us to be a foretaste of his new creation here in Knoxville, Tennessee. That is our missionary calling—to be witnesses that our God is a God of new creation, that new creation has begun *now*, but it is not complete. We are witnesses ourselves—within ourselves, our very bodies—that God does not create once, for we cherish this Gospel truth having been baptized in Christ:

2 Corinthians 5:17–18 (ESV) Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation

Our Lord calls us to be an Advent house, both personally and collectively, to be foretastes here in Knoxville, TN, of something far more enduring, more beautiful, more eternal than any building. On this occasion, I remember the great desire King David held in his heart, 'Lord, I want to build you a house!' What was the Lord's response? 'I will make you a house first—the house of David. Through your holy lineage, the Messiah will come. Your son, Solomon, will build a Temple house for me, but my

¹ Psalm 115.1

² Isaiah 65.21

first promise is the *people will become my holy house.*' God's holy people always come before any holy building. That's God's holy order. The Lord is building a house of saints, saints who will be foretastes of his heavenly, eternal Kingdom. And I will give them houses and altars to worship me, a glimpse, a window, an echo in Time that heaven desires to come down to earth. We are his Advent house, and this is his Advent altar.

Both Bride and Friend of the Bridegroom

You may have heard the saying from the imminently quotable Sir Winston Churchill, 'We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.' Let this Advent altar, these Advent kneelers, shape *us* into his holy Advent house.

How much joy and peace it gives us to see the colors in these new stain-glass windows today! When sunlight illuminates these colors, without words, our soul desires to pray and worship, to encounter the Beautiful One, Jesus Christ! How much more splendor do we find in the living icons of Christ's light! We, my brothers and sisters, are members of the Bride of Christ, adorned and clothed with countless graces from our Lord Jesus. *You* are the windows through whom our neighbors will see Christ. Seekers came to the disciples of Jesus long ago saying, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' I pray that our neighbors would be inspired by the beauty of this nave. I pray even *more* that our neighbors and friends will be inspired by the beauty of Christ dwelling within you.

And yet, always remember: no matter how much one desires a church home; no matter how much one hungers for beauty; no matter who desperate one is for Christian community, the greatest desire of the soul is Jesus. All symbols—ourselves included—must point to Jesus.

Let Apostles always be an Advent house. Embrace the attitude of that greatest of Advent prophets, John the Baptist. John the Baptist told those waiting, longing, yearning for the Messiah, 'I am not the one you're looking for.' I'm only sent to prepare the way for the One your soul desires most of all.

We pray that this church will always be a place to hear the Gospel of Christ, to receive his sacraments, to share life together in the Kingdom. I pray that Apostles will be a loving church home for many in our earthly pilgrimage. But remember: we're not home yet, though this be our church home. This church, nor any other, cannot complete your joy. Only an Advent house can say with confidence: 'we cannot complete your joy.' To paraphrase the psalmist, 'If I forget the New Jerusalem, O Lord, let my right hand forget its skill.'³Our joy will not be complete until new creation is complete. So we will be the most faithful to the Lord when we assume the attitude of John the Baptist, 'He who comes from above (Advent!) is above all! He must increase, but (we) must decrease.'

To Decrease and Kneel

This is one of best reasons for this Advent house to have kneelers. It teaches us to decrease. It teaches us to confess our sins. It teaches us to pray as Jesus taught, 'Come, Lord Jesus, speed your return!'

It trains us that we receive the Body and Blood of Christ not because we deserve grace, but because Christ knows we're hungry for grace. And he feeds those who are hungry. He knows how weary we are from our old ways, our regrets, our habits that we cannot overcome, so he bids the humble and

³ Psalm 137.5

broken to come and be made new by his grace every Sunday. Here's the Anglican doctrine of salvation in summary, beginning with baptism: I have been saved, I'm being saved, and by the grace of God I will be saved when he returns on the Last Day. Do Anglicans have an altar call? Yes! Every Sunday! Do Anglicans get saved? Yes! Every Sunday! We confess our sins; the Word of the Cross obliterates the word of shame; grace bids all who are cleansed by baptism to come and kneel and be saved again and again.

We have shaped this church house to shape us in humility—to decrease and kneel, and so learn the way of Christ. In so doing, we will fulfill our calling—looking beyond us, looking past us, to look for the coming One, Jesus. Let us be the Bride, waiting eagerly for the voice of the Bridegroom. Let us be like John the Baptist and say, 'He who comes from above is above all! He must increase, but we must decrease.' When we kneel, let us remember that the promise of the Lord from Isaiah remains, 'Before they call,' says the Lord, 'I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.'

A House Made for Joy, A People of Gladness

Because we are gathered here on Gaudete Sunday—the Sunday of Advent joy—I want to conclude with the encouragement that we inhabit this Advent house with joy. This is the will of God in his first creation; it is his redemptive purpose in new creation. Hear his word again through Isaiah: 'Be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for *behold I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.*'

Here the Holy Spirit address us again through St Paul: 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.' This Advent house is created to be a house of joy; that we would be shaped by joy.

The joy of the Lord is no passing emotion. Our joy does not depend on temporary things. Our joy does not require that things work out in this life as we had hoped. Like the gift of peace that comes through Christ, the joy our Lord gives is a joy that this world and this life *cannot* give. Our joy is the truth that Christ is died, Christ is risen, Christ is coming again.

We have suffered and we will suffer again here; we have mourned and we will mourn again here. There will be Sundays when this altar will catch your tears. But we will not place our hope in the odds that maybe next year will be a bit better. Our hope, our joy is in the Word of God that we hear in this Advent house that promises, 'Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.'

I pray that Apostles will be your church home for many years, for decades to come; that when your way leads you to weep, you will come home here clinging to the promise of joy, a joy that this world cannot give. But the best this Advent church can offer you is a foretaste of unending joy and laughter and singing—the joy that is coming! So let us rejoice and laugh and sing in this Advent house *now*. Here we see light and color in the windows, a Nave and Sanctuary that lead us to worship the Holy One with beauty, reverence, and holiness. Oh, but remember these are glimpses of what is coming. That's what any sign of beauty is meant to be—a sign that the Beautiful, Eternal Beautiful City that is coming down from heaven, when Christ, the Bridegroom, will return for his Bride; when he completes his work of new creation and heaven and earth will be one. Then and there our joy will be complete, Advent will give way to Eternity, and we will be glad forever, at home, at last, in the house of our God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.