**Seeking the Sacred: Time
Luke 1:5-20**Rev. Nancy S. Lynn
December 2, 2018

 Thanksgiving is over and the season of preparation is officially upon us. Actually, if you take your cues from the stores in town, you would think we all began preparing for Christmas in October, but that is neither here nor there. Today is the second of December and, for many of us, the seasonal insanity has begun. On your to-do list for the next three and a half weeks might be - gift shopping, gift wrapping, cookie baking, housecleaning, tree getting, tree decorating, house decorating, house cleaning, kids’ concerts, kids’ plays, kids’ parties, work parties, neighborhood parties, meal planning, package sending, traveling and hosting. The pace you will need to keep to accomplish all of that - particularly if you are aiming for the Martha Stewart level of Christmas celebration - will exhaust you and, potentially, bring you to the brink of scrooginess.

 You know scrooginess, don’t you? It is the bad mood that hangs over you when you feel so pressured, so stressed, so worn out by the holidays that your signature word becomes, “Bah Humbug” - or something like it. You begin to say things like, “I’m just so busy I can’t enjoy the season” and “Do I really have to go to another Christmas party?” You get short- tempered with your kids, grouchy with your spouse, impatient with yourself. At its worst, scrooginess leads to over-eating, over-drinking, and over-spending.

 Now, there are some among us for whom the holidays are inevitably going to be difficult. Those who are grieving - who are anticipating an empty chair at their holiday table. Those who have depression or illness - any health problem that dominates their time and energy. And those who are lonely. There are a lot of things that happen in life that are too big to ignore, too sad to walk away from - whether it is Christmas season or not. It is for those folks that we annually hold our Service of Light in Darkness - a special worship service that makes space for grief and struggle when the rest of the world is busy with joy and celebration.

 Today, however, I’m talking to all of us who bring scrooginess on ourselves. You see, we don’t have to buy into it all. We don’t have to do all the parties and the preparations, spend the money, worry about the housecleaning. We, particularly as followers of Jesus, can approach this season entirely differently. Rather than being driven to craziness by the demands of the secular world, we can seek out the sacred. We can ground ourselves again in what this holiday really means. So, because I am your pastor and I worry about you; we are going to spend the weeks of Advent, exploring how we find what is sacred in the Christmas craziness. And we’re going to start with talking about sacred time.

 But first, what are we talking about when we say sacred? What does it mean for something to be sacred? Those things that are sacred are those things that are of God. That which is of God is, most simplistically, about love - about compassion, respect, and community.

 So, what is sacred time? How do we seek out sacred time? There are as many ways of thinking about time as there are things to do before Christmas. Let’s talk first about sacred Church time. The Christian Church has its own calendar and seasons. If you’ve been around a while, you probably know that. But, if you didn’t grow up in the church, you may not. In the Christian church, the four weeks before Christmas are known as Advent, and Advent is the start of the Christian year. We don’t really know when Christians first identified Advent as a season of the church year though it appears to have started in Spain and France during the fourth century. At that time, it was a season leading up to Epiphany, the twelve days after Christmas, because new Christians were often preparing to be baptized on Epiphany. However, by the sixth century, Advent was being celebrated across the Christian church and had been shortened to the four weeks leading up to Christmas. The word “advent” means coming, and the season evolved to be a time of preparation for the coming of Christ - both the coming of Christ at Christmas and the second coming when God’s peaceable kingdom will be fully realized. It is a time of patience and waiting.

 While the church waits, we prepare for Christmas by decorating, lighting the Advent wreath, worshipping, singing Advent carols, and retelling the stories around Jesus’ birth. Many of the Advent scriptures remind us that Jesus came into the world at in a time of heartache and struggle to be God in the flesh, love incarnate. All of this - the candles, the carols, the scripture readings - draw us into the sacred.

 The only problem is that then we leave church - and go back out there – where other than hearing some of the carols played on the radio or over a tinny sound system in the mall, there is little that acknowledges the holiness of the season. This means that we are left on our own to find our way into sacred time.

 How do we, in the midst of so many other activities, find time to set aside to seek the sacred, to open ourselves to the beauty of the now, to be present to God’s spirit working within us and prepare ourselves for Christmas? How can we encounter the mystery of incarnation with exams to study for or grade, children to occupy, and gifts to buy?

 The obvious answers are to pray, to read scripture, or to use an Advent devotional. Yet, if you are like me, it can be very hard to maintain those habits through this season. So, I’m going to encourage you to consider seeking sacred time in some other ways that might feel more natural or do- able in your busy life.

 First, breathe. You’ve heard me say this during Advent before. You can stop and breathe any time. Have a word that you breathe in and a word that you breathe out. Breathe in “peace”, breathe out “busy”. Breathe in “loved”, breathe out “overwhelmed”. Breathe in “sacred”, breathe out “stress”. Breathe in “word”, breathe out “world”. There are so many of these combinations. They are called breath prayers and, honestly, I don’t know a faster or easier way to reconnect with the holy. The very word for spirit in Hebrew actually translates in English to breath.

 Here’s another approach to seeking sacred time. Create a ritual that is yours. Not something that everyone does every year in preparation for Christmas, but something simple that you do because it has meaning to you and makes you more aware of God’s presence. It doesn’t matter what it is or if it’s something you do daily or weekly or only once during Advent. What matters is that it is a period of time in which you encounter the sacred. This, in turn, gives the season a new or deeper meaning. Some of you know that I have a ritual of watching the sunrise on the morning after the longest night of the year because I find great comfort and hope in the promise that light overcomes darkness. Over the years, that has become one of the most sacred rituals in the Advent season for me.

 And that leads to another way of seeking the sacred - share your stories. Tell your children what you remember that made this season special when you were a child. Reminisce with your parents. Take time in your small group or as you’re sitting over coffee to share a moment when you experienced God’s presence, when you felt what it means to encounter Jesus in another person or to be Jesus for someone else. Those are sacred moments.

 There is one other aspect of sacred time that I want to touch on and that is God’s time. Opening ourselves to God’s time is what the story of Zechariah is really all about. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were old - well past child-bearing years. They had given up hope of ever having a baby. So, when the angel comes to Zechariah and tells him that Elizabeth will soon have a child, Zechariah can’t believe this is possible. Too much time has passed. It’s too late. And yet, Elizabeth does become pregnant and gives birth to John the Baptist. For years, Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed and they waited and no baby came. And then - just as they were tempted to give up hope - God acted.

 The ancient Greeks spoke of two kinds of time - chronos and kairos. Chronos is what we understand to be chronological time. Kairos is the opportune moment, the right moment for something to happen. God works in kairos time, God’s time, opening new opportunities, offering new experiences, resolving old conflicts often when we least expect it but need it most. Perhaps like Zechariah and Elizabeth, you are waiting for some hope of yours to be fulfilled, some prayer to be answered. Perhaps you have been waiting for God to act and are close to giving up, believing that God has not heard you, that it is too late. Advent teaches us, as we wait and prepare, that God acts on a schedule we cannot begin to comprehend. God time is sacred time. Our task is to learn to trust that God is working - even in our darkness and our fear, even in a world full of hunger and hurt - and that, just like the Christmas story, our story will unfold at the right time. Our task is to use these days of waiting to grow to know God better, to be more faithful, to find the reflection of Christ in ourselves. May we use this time, these four weeks of Advent, as time when, rather than succumbing to scrooginess, we open our eyes and seek out the sacred - in the season, in our lives, in our world.

 May it be so. Amen.