Advent 3 – Reflecting on the Kingdom in the Faintly Falling Snow.

The Irish writer James Joyce, wrote a collection of stories called ‘Dubliners’ at the end of one of these called ‘The Dead’ he wrote…***His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”***

The character, Gabriel, reflects that although there is a level of love he and his wife share, there was one other whom she had loved and if that one other were not already dead, Gabriel probably would not now be married to his wife. Although all seems quite right around him in his own life, he will live his life in the shadow of the dead. There will be doubts. There will be uncertainty of the fullness of love. How now will he live.

When the snow falls as it has these last few days here around us in Surrey, Vancouver, and the lower mainland, everything has slowed down and almost stopped and perhaps this gives us pause to contemplate the shadows we live with ourselves. All is not as we would wish it to be; but shadows and doubts are opportunities for growth and deeper understanding. How now will we live.

Turning to the Gospel this morning then, it is clear the words ‘There’s a voice in the wilderness crying’ we heard last week have changed to ‘there’s a voice in the prison asking’. A short time ago John had said ‘here he is, the one we have been waiting for’. Now he is asking ‘are you the one?’ He is doubting and questioning. The sudden reality of prison, of everything not being so right, causes him to pause and wonder if Jesus is the one. The path John has taken led him to imprisonment and will lead to his death. So, what is it God is doing then? what is God working at? It is for John a time of living with the shadows of doubt and uncertainty. The route to a deeper understanding lays in his understanding of what he believes the kingdom of God to be. Perhaps it isn’t exactly as he had thought. Perhaps there is something more, something deeper, or even in a different direction. What he was so certain of, he now has to rethink just what is God’s kingdom.

I hope that we, as the church, will be the voice crying in the wilderness. That we will be voice of hope as we minister and tend to those who are in the greatest need. That we will cry out for justice. But we do not often use as loud a voice as John. It seems we use our voice more often to talk quietly to ourselves. Perhaps we only use our voice to think about what justice means in God’s Kingdom before we go to sleep at night. Too often our voice is not one of certainty crying in the wilderness but more of a quiet inward reflection as we watch the snow falling.

This afternoon there is a gathering in Fort Langley to protest Kinder Morgan and the proposed pipeline; a cry in the wilderness perhaps. Do you know where you stand on the pipeline? Do the conversations we all have have simply revolve around jobs and economic opportunities or, do we, like John, seeing what Jesus was doing, begin to rethink and look at creation differently? Maybe there is more to this. What does putting a pipeline through say about the care of the earth, the peace of the earth and true justice and healing for people at the centre of God’s Kingdom. May all this be accomplished in some other way than building a pipeline. Just how far can we see beyond what is immediately before us? Some will say ‘but God has given us the earth to utilize, that jobs for people IS justice so people can take care of their families.’ But perhaps the Kingdom of God is not so simple as that. We always, always need to take the time to reflect to understand what the good news really is, or in this case the way forward. The universe is pregnant with God’s Kingdom waiting to push through. If it is for all people and for all creation, how will that kingdom be born and grow? Like John, pausing to contemplate our doubts is good. It allows room to take a closer look at those things of which we have been so certain.

So like the leaders of Israel who wanted to continue to self-govern with only limited interference from the Romans, they saw in John and indeed in Jesus someone who could upset the delicate balance of that limited self autonomy. John, though we do not know a great deal about him, was pretty clear in what he had to say and he did not mind putting leaders on the spot and embarrassing them. Pipeline buildings, like other leaders do not want to be embarrassed. They would prefer no one meddle or interfere with their economic endeavours. Voices crying in the wilderness an not often appreciated.

Jesus took another approach. He did not stand on the edge, but entered into the midst. He demonstrated in all that he did just what the kingdom of God is to be. It is a community of healing and justice for human beings **AND** all of creation. John questions Jesus’ tactics of sharing the message. Did the message of Jesus go deeper or did Jesus’ message cover a broader spectrum than the immediate political situation? Is the kingdom something more than this? With this pipeline project, we are not simply fighting against others making decisions for us, we are speaking about the integrity of creation where we live. It is something we each really need to think through for ourselves. We should have doubts about projects of this kind. Some regard Kinder Morgan as some sort of Messiah that will bring jobs to some even if it is just for the moment. Some protest a pipeline because there is not enough economic benefit for the communities it passes through. Is that good enough? Our thoughts have to be much deeper and far-ranging that simple answers. So as John begins to question whether Jesus was the Messiah, so we really need to think how decisions about pipelines are made. Its affects are much wider than we can imagine. The doubts we have ensure we are questioning what it really means to have faith and not blindly carry on doing what we have always done. Doubts help us to take the long view rather than accept the short-term gain and prosperity. Doubts help us to consider at deeper levels what God’s Kingdom looks like, how it is to unfold, and what our role might be in it.

Jesus’ answer to John’s question then was to simply say ‘the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, lepers are healed, the dead are raised and Good News is being preached to the poor.’ John is left to think about that. In this world of war and strife, natural disaster, crime and illness and pipeline building we are left to think about that too. Every day we are faced with the questions that may bring doubts of the goodness of God to our minds. But every day we see the work of the Kingdom being done by those who are waiting. So we will have our doubts but we will continue working and ministering and sharing good news with the poor. As church, we support and encourage one another in the vision that Jesus shared with his first disciples. It is important then to always have before us the long view vision of the kingdom, to have hands that reach out to bring healing, and finding ways to share good news to encourage and lift the poor and build toward justice.

The question I put to myself and have for you is this. Have you, yourself, ever stood up as a voice crying out to be heard over all the other voices? So I ask once again, ‘What do you think about Kinder Morgan?’ How do you think that through yourself, take a stand, and speak to what you think. The snow is falling and faintly falling…on all the living and the dead. Where are the shadows here and how do we live with the shadows?

Another question… for myself and for you… Have you, yourself ever been a voice of consolation to those who need to hear good news? And I ask here, at this very moment, how are you involved in a ministry that embodies sharing good news, that makes clear to others just what you believe through your actions amongst those for whom our Lord came.

Advent, meaning coming, is a time of expectation of God’s Kingdom. It is the hope of change for justice and peace for people. The snow we have had this past week had a way of slowing us down. We have not had snow like this in about 1000 days. The last time was in late February, 2014. It was over those few days that I came to St. Helen’s to meet with the canonical committee in an interview about the possibility of being your new rector. Everyone said it had not snowed like this here in years and years. Over those few days the snow slowed down our conversation and gave us all pause to think about God’s Kingdom and St. Helen’s role in building that kingdom. The snow helped us consider the major change both for St. Helen’s and for me. I wonder if the snow this past week can be taken as yet another sign of change for us all, not that I am thinking of leaving, but for St. Helen’s to have a deeper reflection about ourselves and on the relationship with everyone and everything around us.

So the snow has been falling here this week, softly, faintly, falling, and ever so gently, upon the living and the dead. Here on us and those in our cemetery; upon those with warm homes an those who are homeless, the well fed and the hungry, the employed and the unemployed, on people and on all creation. Are we able to think of the snow that falls upon us as a reminder of God’s blessings as well as God’s expectations. If we can, then we might see that the land is covered with blessings. It reminds us that there are those for whom the Lord has come to bless though our hands and love. It helps us to be mindful of that dynamic tension of belief in the Kingdom that is present and yet to come when we allow both our present faith and our doubts drive us on. So as we are reminded, let us not simply shovel those reminders out of our path, but let them lay there before us. Together we can trudge our way through the snow and reflect on the blessings that fall upon us all and make us one.

(This morning, when we are sent back out into the world we will go singing ‘Joy to the World’. We sing this to remember, that even though it is found in the Christmas section of the hymnal, it isn’t a Christmas Carol. It is an Advent hymn, not just waiting for the kingdom but as we work, reflect, and proclaim the Kingdom.