

Advent 2

I would like to share with you today some of the results from The National Study of Youth and Religion. This study interviewed teens from across the US on their faith and religion and completed their research in 2010. I have a summary of their findings on the narthex table if you want to read more. The good news is - teenagers aren't opposed to religion. The bad news is they think church and religion are nice. And I'm learning that in Minnesota, nice isn't always a good word. The study found that in the lives of teenagers the crux of religion and faith is to be nice to each other. Not only that, but the goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself.

While most teens did identify themselves as something religious – either Lutheran, Catholic or Jewish or Christian, for most teens, it's just a title. Faith didn't make a real difference in the teens' daily lives. For most it was one more thing that make them a well-rounded person – like playing sports or playing an instrument. The researchers further found that while being interviewed, teens had a really hard time being articulate about what they do believe. Speaking in terms of faith was like using a second language. God is great, but God holds no daily impact on the majority of these young people's lives. This is the hope that the majority of teens are holding onto right now and this study also points out that teens have arrived at this state of belief from watching the rest of us.

That's the research and it's helpful to some extent – because we are seeing some of these trends in our kids. But I can also see in our congregation through our conversations, through the ways you've given of yourself, through the ways you've loved others that Christ does make a difference to you. And not only does Christ make a difference to you, but you want to make sure that the Christ faith is passed down, certainly within your own family, but also within the family of God here at Gethsemane.

We are encouraged from Isaiah to "Cry out!" about our faith about God in our lives. And the reply comes, "what shall I cry?" It's hard to know how to talk about the holy, mysterious One. But Isaiah goes on to say that news about God is good tidings for a people thirsty for hope. "O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

You have kids, grandkids, nieces and nephews who need something real to hold onto...a real hope when things get tough...a real light in the darkness...good news proclaimed from people they love and trust when there is so much bad news being heralded around them. We can witness to our young people (and I say "our" by the fact that the baptismal promises made around that font aren't just for the parents and sponsors, but promises made by the whole community)...we can witness to our young people that Jesus is the Light of the world. For Jesus to make a difference in the lives of young people, we need to show them how Jesus has made a difference in our lives. And not only show, but talk about it.

We can be Advent people, like John the Baptist, who begin spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. And it's interesting that the good news begins with repentance, or turning again to God. John was getting the people ready for the amazing thing God was about to do.

He points to the Messiah figure, the coming One who is bringing the Holy Spirit. What God is up to now in Jesus is nothing other than to say, "Here is your God!" Our texts from Isaiah and Mark remind us that God has been about good news all along and that the good news, or gospel, is at the very heart of who God is and what God calls us to be.

My grandmother used to run the nursery at the church I grew up at. I remember how safe and warm and exciting it was to be in the nursery because she seemed to take on an extra confidence or light when she was taking care of kids, leading them in "Jesus Loves Me This I Know" or reading us a story. I remember that experience of being safe and warm and with my grandmother as the foundation of who I knew God to be. When my mom said it was time to go to church to worship God, I thought of the nursery with my grandmother. And I love that, aside from my baptism, that is how God chose to start building faith in me.

Emmanuel, God-with-us, is coming. John the Baptist is preparing the way. As the prophet Isaiah writes of the Lord, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."

Depending on what stage of life each sheep is at, the Lord is there for the sheep's unique needs and support – leading, feeding or carrying. This is the prophetic vision for how Jesus actively works in our lives – through our different stages of life – caring for each of us individually in our own special way, but never losing sight of the fact that we're not stray sheep, we belong in the flock together.

As Advent people waiting for God's coming, we trust that Christ makes a difference. Our waiting is not in vain, but the result of our deep need for some good news, some light, some hope. We recognize these needs particularly during this time of the year when the days are shorter and darkness seems to overwhelm the day. We recognize our struggles, but we also recognize our hope. It's a hope that others need to hear about. It's a hope that our teenagers need, but maybe can't put words to yet. It's a hope that draws people because it's the only hope that can truly comfort.

As Advent people, let's be honest, open and even demonstrative about what the good news of Christ's coming means to us. Let's take the lead to approach our young people in the church and ask about what they're learning about in Sunday School or learning in confirmation or listen to what's really going on in their life. How might Christ be bringing good news into their lives? Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, the two sociologists who headed up the National Study of Youth and Religion mentioned that one reason young people hardly ever talk about their faith is because they've never been asked.

As Advent people, let's start asking all the young people in our lives – who is God to you? Do you pray? What are some things that really matter to you? What are some of your gifts? How do you live out your gifts? How can I support you in living out your gifts?

I have no doubt that your life will be enriched by engaging in these questions with a young person. You're sharing the good news. And you might be surprised by how much good news these young people share with you as well. Good news has a way of doing that. Amen.