Sunday 29 November 2015


The Kingdom of God is NEAR
Background and Preparation

1 December is World AIDS Day. Throughout the world this day is used to increase awareness around HIV and AIDS and to encourage people to be part of the solution. The multi-year theme is “Getting to Zero”. This links to the UNAIDS call for zero new infections, zero AIDS-related deaths and zero stigma and discrimination.

We as church, as community of believers, is inextricably part of this world bowed down by the impact of HIV and AIDS. This is why we as church are also called to be part of the solution.

It is true that HIV is not as visible or experienced as directly in all churches or congregations, but, however it may be, 1 Cor 12: 12- 31 help us understand that:

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ (12)...Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many (14)...But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. (18)...As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (20)... The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" (21)...On the contrary, ... (22) If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (26)”

For this reason we cannot be blinded by the context of our own congregation, but need to look wider and deliberately choose to identify with the HIV positive body of Christ.

A few statistics can be used to emphasize that HIV is an inextricable part of the Southern African context:

According to UNAIDS and the World Health Organisation an estimated 6.8 million people in South Africa were living with HIV in 2014. Using the accepted figure of 15- 49 year olds, more or less 18.9% of the South African population is living with HIV. If we think of the parents, partners, children, families, friends, carers and colleagues of each of these individuals, it is clear that the impact of HIV is felt very far and deep in our communities.

For more details about the prevalence of HIV in different age groups and provinces, the Departement of Health report can be downloaded at http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/media-briefs/hiv-aids-stis-and-tb/sabssm4-launch. New reports are often made public at this time of year – reports will be highlighted on the CABSA website. (www.cabsa.org.za)

For other contexts and countries, you can access the most recent UNAIDS statistics from http://www.unaids.org/en/dataanalysis/datatools/aidsinfo/

As Africans and South Africans, HIV and AIDS is part and parcel of our everyday context. Although less prevalent in some other parts of the world, no country is immune and HIV is an issue that should receive our attention throughout the year.

However, on the Sunday before the 1st of December, we ask you as congregation to make the issue of HIV visible in a very practical way. As church we need to identify with the HIV epidemic and be willing to be part of a community that responds to it with compassion and responsibility.

World AIDS Day also falls in the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence, when attention is also given to a number of other issues where our prophetic-based voice should be heard.
For more information about this campaign, visit http://www.cabsa.org.za/content/16-days-activism-against-gender-violence

The following Video clips may be downloaded from YouTube and used in different places during the service:

Please watch the videos and make sure that you are comfortable with the content before you use it.

**Words and Actions** (can be useful as call to action at the end of the service)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGi7EwWX_b0&feature=endscreen&NR=1 or
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=vGi7EwWX_b0

**HIV infections falling** (can be used to highlight statistics).

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFnaLXenRn0&feature=endscreen&NR=1

**7000 infections per day:**

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNZVwJU0nlw

I predict

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEUIQd9k0Y&feature=list_other&playnext=1&list=SP9407AE8E2E8EB4

**Don’t turn your back** (can be played repeatedly as the congregation leaves the church)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coPEVTSuw8o
Liturgy

Welcome
To God the Father, our Saviour Jesus Christ, who became human and was born in a humble stable, and God the Spirit, who lives in us and turns our hearts towards You and who reminds us of the true living hope brought by Christ’s death on the cross: To Your name be the praise, the honour and the glory. For ever and ever. Amen

Blessing:
"Blessed are the poor in spirit (those who know how dependent they are on God), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Mat 5:3

Praise and Worship
(Choose one or more songs dedicated to the glory of Jesus.)
Suggestions:
• Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty
• Majesty
• Alleluia, Alleluia.

Prayer and Candle Ceremony
Lighting of the first Advent candle:

(Preparation: Before the service, place a white candle, large enough to be visible to the congregation, in a prominent place. Ensure that matches are available as well as a red ribbon, +/-60cm long)

Preacher: Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Although shops and advertisements have been trumpeting about Christmas, Advent is the time when we as church start looking forward to and preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.
This is why we light the first Advent candle today – and this candle burns as a symbol of HOPE. This candle burns today to remind us that our hope is anchored in the living and Holy God, Christ Jesus, who became human and lived amongst us, Immanuel, God with us.

(Light the candle, or invite a congregation member to do this. You could arrange ahead of the service that someone does this.)
Preacher: In seemingly shrill contrast with the message of advent, the start of advent coincides with World AIDS Day, which was celebrated yesterday. This reminds us of the harsh realities of the world we live in and the many millions of lives touched by the HIV pandemic.

Here in church we also need to remind each other of the presence of the epidemic in our society and in our faith community. And there is also comfort today in knowing that the candle of hope is a witness to the hope in Christ for every household and family whose lives are touched by the reality of HIV or AIDS.

(Tie a red ribbon around the Candle of Hope, or arrange in advance that a congregation member does this).

Ask the congregation to join by praying the following prayer together:

Jesus, You give us life and hope
You who became human, who came to live amongst us,
Who knew the love of a human family,
And the comradeship of your disciples,
Even on the cross, your mother and some of your friends were near You.

Immanuel, God with us,
We come to You specifically to pray for those amongst and around us Living with HIV and AIDS;
May each one be blessed with the love and care of friends and family,
May Your presence and hope be tangible for each one – especially in difficult times,
May each one’s physical and spiritual needs be met
And none feel lonely or rejected.

Lord, may each one feel safe and at home, and be safe in our midst
And teach us to to carry each other’s burdens with compassion and understanding,
But also to rejoice together in You, our only true hope.

Amen

Scripture Reading
The kingdom of God is NEAR.
Seimon

(These suggestions are based on the Afrikaans sermon guidelines “2 Desember 2012, Eerste Sondag in Advent, Preekstudie – Lukas 21:25-38 in Woord en Fees”. We highlight the following 4 main thoughts.)

1. We are still waiting for the return of Jesus
We are first of all reminded that the impressive, majestic second coming which we read about in v 27 has not taken place yet. When Luke wrote this gospel (85-90AC), he used the gospel of Mark, which was written 20 years earlier, as source. Luke tries to make sense of the fact that it is 20 years later and Jesus had not returned yet.

And today, 2000 years later, the question is even more relevant, because we are still living in expectation of the return of our Lord. This can bring us to ask – how should we wait on the return of Christ?

2. It may even feel as if God is absent today.
In verse 25-26 we read of alarming signs in nature which spread fear, terror and desperation amongst the people of the world:

“People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” (v26)

If we think about the realities of our context, we can also say that the challenges we face make us feel that God and His kingdom are very far from our everyday world.

We humans face a variety of crises. We are aware of regular natural catastrophes; just think of the chaos and upheaval caused by the Super-storm Sandy and the effect of climate change. There is also the economic recession which influences all of us, but has a particularly crippling effect on the old established economies of Europe, there is political instability in the Middle East, but also in other parts of the world. And then we have not even touched on poverty and the fact that around 34 million people worldwide are living with HIV or AIDS.

In South Africa the situation is not much better. We are all aware of the Marikana tragedy, the prolonged strikes particularly in the mining industry, widespread corruption, unemployment, the rising cost of living, violence, intolerance and mistrust. In addition to all this, we are the country with the highest number of people living with HIV – around 5.57 million. Just think of the incredible impact this has on so many aspects of our society.

We could indeed ask “where is God, then?” Are we waiting in vain for Jesus to return?

3. See the signs, lift up your head!
But what does Luke say? He challenges us to LIVE from the hope that we have in Jesus, when he says in verse 28 “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”
We are reminded that our hope is anchored in the living Christ. These things will pass, but we dream of a new Jerusalem! We are reminded, even more, we are called not to lose courage, but to stand up straight.

Luke goes even further, saying: “Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” (V 31)

Why? Because these things are a sign:
- Like a tree which begins to bud is a sign that summer is near,
- Like the bright decorations in the shops are a sign that Christmas is near,
- Like Christmas is a sign, a reminder, of God’s gift of love to us,
- Like the birth of Jesus is a sign of the redemption which God brought about for us...

In this way the things that threaten to frighten and overwhelm us are a sign that the kingdom of God is near.

4. But what about this in–between time?

How can the kingdom of God be near when it feels so far? When we are surrounded by so much pain and suffering?

The troubles of the world have the ability to drag us down, and the fact that it too will pass is not enough consolation for our daily existence. The reality is that we know that this life will come to an end, but while the new beginning has not happened, how do we live NOW?

Do we wait for the kingdom to arrive from heaven – or do we bring the kingdom of God to our current context. Or is it rather a matter of how we see God’s kingdom in ourselves and around us?

The person confronted with a HIV positive diagnosis today will definitely not find immediate consolation in the fact that everyone will die someday. After all, the only life each of us knows is this one, the one we are living now. And if we are totally honest, very few of actually want to die today! We have dreams and plans and people here in our earthly existence. And while we are here we certainly try to give meaning to our lives. Therefore it is certainly logical that those of us living with HIV also still dream of a meaningful life, of seeing our children grow up and of growing old with our loved ones.

After all, God created this earth. And if our life on this earth was so inconsequential, would He have been so concerned to reconcile us to Him? Why do we not all pass on to the ideal life in heaven?

Dr Ronell Bezuidenhout writes:

“When life is upside down, you look for an escape...people in this situation cling to hope. This of course compels us, when things are going well with us, to support those with whom it is not going well! Those whose heads are hanging, whose troubles are pulling their shoulders down. We need to also lift the veil for them....because the one thing we have to remember is that we only have the ‘now’ to live in...this time is not ‘near” because it has not happened yet, but nearby...next to....close by...around...so close to us, because the time has in fact already dawned!”
Jesus already brought about our reconciliation with God. This is why we live now and why each of us can hold on to God’s presence in our ‘today’.

And if the Kingdom of God is near, maybe we should think of the word “near” not only as indicating time. The word “near” after all also refers to position. The “the kingdom of God is near” therefor also means that it is close, close to MY body and close to MY reality.

Whether I am HIV Positive or not. Whether HIV directly touched my household or not. Whether I have lost loved ones to an AIDS related death or not...whether I secretly worry about my own HIV status...or live with the guilt that I am not always faithful to my partner...the one thing we all have in common, is this – Today we all have today before us.

We don’t know about tomorrow. We don’t know when Jesus will return in glory on the clouds, but what we do have is today. Today is near. Today is real. How can we live today to make the kingdom of God real and visible around me, near me.

The waiting referred to in the text is not passive...we read: “Stand up and lift up your heads (v28)... Be careful, (v34) ... Be always on the watch, and pray (v36)”

_The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!"
And let the one who hears say, "Come!"
Let the one who is thirsty come;
and let the one who wishes take
the free gift of the water of life_

Rev 22:17

Because “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” Luke 2:11

**Invitation to Congregation:**

**Preacher:** Dear Congregation, while we are waiting, while we are praying, the candle of hope is burning today for each of us, and reminds us that hope is not only for ‘one day’. We live today in the wonderful knowledge that God is already present in and concerned with our lives. We also know that through our presence, we bring God’s presence to each other’s lives. Let us therefor make our compassion for each other and for each one whose life is touched by HIV and AIDS visible also in this service.

(Choose any of the following invitations to the congregation: )

**Option 1**

**Preacher:** If you would like to commit yourself, your partner, a child, a brother or sister, a friend, a colleague or employer who is living with HIV to the Lord, please come to the front and light a candle for them.

(A song or soft music can be played in the background while congregants have the opportunity to come to the front.)
(Prepare enough small candles in baskets. The first few people can light their candles at the candle of hope. Thereafter they can also light their candles from each other's candle.)

Option 2

Preacher: If you would like to commit yourself, your partner, a child, a brother or sister, a friend, a colleague or employer who is living with HIV to the Lord, please come to the front so that we can pray together.

(A song or soft music can be played in the background while congregants have the opportunity to come to the front.)

Option 3

Preacher: If you would like to commit yourself, your partner, a child, a brother or sister, a friend, a colleague or employer who is living with HIV to the Lord, please stand just where you are. When we stand, we declare our solidarity with each other and we admit that the body of Christ is living with HIV.

(Give enough time for the congregation to think about this and then pray the following prayer)

Prayer in Response to HIV and AIDS (shortened version)

(The congregation can be asked to stand and pray the following prayer together)

Preacher: Our Father, we stand before You in awe and worship. We praise You, Lord Jesus that you came into our world, so that we may become children of God – heirs to eternal life. Holy Spirit we thank you as our Comforter and Strength...

Congregation: ..for your loving kindness is forever.

Preacher: Merciful God, we remember before you all who are sick this day, and especially all persons with HIV or AIDS...

Congregation: ...for your loving kindness is forever.

Preacher: Give them courage to live with their condition. Help them to face and overcome their fears. Be with them when they are alone or rejected. Comfort them when they are discouraged and touch them with your healing Spirit that they may find and possess eternal life now and forever...

Congregation: ...for your loving kindness is forever.

Preacher: Holy and life-giving God, fill our hearts and thoughts with your love and compassion for each other. Remove fear, stigma and judgment from our hearts and teach us to look at each other with Your heart...
Congregation: ...for your loving kindness is forever.

Preacher: Heavenly father, forgive our failure to respond adequately to the HIV pandemic and the cries of those who need our help. Fill us with your love and compassion and make us channels of Your hope...

Congregation: ...for your loving kindness is forever.

Amen

Hymn
(Choose a song or hymn referring to the coming of the kingdom of God):
Suggested Hymns - The New Jerusalem, Silent Night

Blessing: Let us go from here committed to be carriers of hope, with our heads held high in the knowledge that God and His kingdom is indeed near.
Provided by CABSA

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Based on the “Woord en Fees - Preekstudies en Liturgiese Voorstelle Gebaseer op die Kerklike Jaar 2013”, Bybel-Media.


Reconciliation and Hope in a World with HIV