

Advent 1

November 29, 2020

Emmanuel Episcopal Church

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Happy New Year, friends! Today marks the beginning of the church's new year, the First Sunday of Advent. I don't know about you, but I have never been happier to see the beginning of a new year. In the past year we have seen devastating fires in Australia and the west coast; global recession and the crash of the stock market; the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery; and of course, the emergence and spread of Covid 19, which at this point has killed over 1 million people, closed schools, churches, and businesses and sent us into varied forms of isolation and lock downs. Never have I been more grateful for the season of Advent to arrive.

Advent is the season of 4 weeks leading up to the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. The word, Advent, means coming or arrival. When I was a pastor, I would always enjoy asking the children, during this season, who are we waiting for? Who is going to arrive on Christmas Day? You could always see the parents in the pews, hoping that their kid wasn't going to be the one who said Santa. Most kids know after awhile that Jesus is always the right answer when you are talking with the pastor up front during church. But there is always that one kid who is honest. Because let's face it, for many of us, this season is about Santa and shopping and parties and cookies and trees and decorations and lights and Hallmark movies and family gatherings and family meals and presents and stockings and shopping and concerts and Christmas music and red cups. The right answer might be Jesus, but for many of us, the season is really about something else entirely.

I wonder: these 4 weeks leading up to Christmas: what defines this in your life? What are the things that you do in these 4 weeks? What is the most important? When the worship service is over today, I invite you to sit still for a few moments, take a piece of paper, and write these things down. Be honest. This exercise is solely for your own reflection.

My suspicion is that for many of us, the season of Advent is defined by things that have not a lot to do with the real point of Advent. What *is* the point of Advent? What *should* we be focused on? Great question; I'm so glad you asked. Advent is focused on the coming of Jesus – not so much the past arrival 2000 years ago but on the future arrival. When Jesus ascended, he promised to come back. This is the coming that we anticipate, particularly on this first Sunday of Advent. The Second Coming of Jesus.

Here is the great promise: not that God is going to destroy this broken earth and we are going to float up to the clouds to be with God; no the promise is that Jesus is going to come back here, that God will come down and restore this earth, this creation that was made by God even as we were made by God; the promise is the new heaven and the new earth, where God's original intention of peace and justice is fulfilled, where the earth is mended and made whole. This is what salvation means: to heal. To make whole.

It makes a tremendous difference to have this as the end goal, does it not? Rather than not caring about this planet, the created order, the animals and the environment and all the people of the earth, this vision of the new heaven and the new earth, of God's dream as Bishop Desmond Tutu would say, calls us to be healers, to be menders who look toward the vision of wholeness and act accordingly to build for it.

Even in the dumpster fire that is 2020. See here's the thing: history is full of times when literally the world was on fire. Times of crisis, destruction, hopelessness, fear. Our biblical history is full of these times. In fact, both of our scripture passages today were written in times of crisis.

It is not accidental that we spend most of Advent reading from Isaiah, and particularly Second Isaiah. The book of Isaiah is broken into three parts, as it was written in three different time periods. Second Isaiah, chapters 40-66 was written in the 500s while the people of Israel were sunk deep in crisis. The temple had been destroyed, Jerusalem had been burned and sacked, and many of the people had been taken captive and exiled, away from their homes to a foreign land. Those who were left in Judah lived in a ruined land. In this time of utter devastation and crisis, the prophet Isaiah is called the prophet of Consolation. The words are full of hope, restoration, and promise, even as the people are living an experience of devastation and suffering.

In the passage we read today from Isaiah 64, the prophet calls on God: do something Lord! O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! Shake the mountains. Deliver your people like you did when they were slaves in Egypt. There is also an honest, personal reflection: yes, we have all sinned. Like Jim Lott said in his sermon last week, we are all both the sheep and the goats. Our iniquities like the wind take us away. And then, a word of hope: yet. You are our Father. We are your children. All of us. Every last one. We are the work of your hand.

I have always loved the image of clay and potter, because it is tactile, creative, personal, and intimate. In that Genesis creation story where God uses the divine hands to create the human and then breathes into the human, mouth to mouth, it is an intimate portrayal of God's relationship with humans. It's scandalous at this moment, when we are scared of the breath that comes out of people's mouths, the droplets that carry sickness, virus, and death. We may be jarred by this image of God, who molds us like clay and breathes life into us with tender love. O to be molded and given breath by this loving God. There is hope that even in a time of suffering and despair, this same God who created us and loves us will not abandon us, but will make us new, will shape us again and bring us wholeness. We are in God's hands, and God is always working for good, even in the midst of despair.

In the Gospel of Mark, scholars call chapter 13 a little Apocalypse. Apocalyptic writing most often happens in the context of extreme suffering and political crisis. When the Gospel of Mark was written, the Jews had tried to revolt against Rome and in return, the Romans destroyed the temple and crushed the people. The suffering was real, the crisis was extreme. Apocalypse is written to give people hope in the midst of real suffering.

And so, we hear Jesus giving these words of hope. After the suffering, the entire cosmos will be affected, the sun and the moon will be dark. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. But you don't know when this is going to happen. AND SO, keep alert, stay awake.

It is my hunch that many of us have fallen asleep to God's dream and the work that this calls us to, day in and day out. I suspect that we have become distracted by our affluence, our comfort, our security, our control. We have eaten too much turkey. Perhaps we have lost the vision of God's kingdom and instead settled for a short-sighted, self-centered vision of my house, my family, my happiness, my comfort.

When Sarah and I sat down a month ago to talk about Advent and Christmas, we talked about this year being a reset. What if you can't go Black Friday shopping, and you can't go to concerts and there is no Xmas parade, and you can't gather your entire family for Christmas dinner and 5 hours worth of Christmas presents?

Perhaps this year, we are invited to lean into the season of Advent, to refocus on God's dream for the new heaven and the new earth, and to reflect on whether our actions and traditions are building for that kingdom or have just centered on the trappings of a commercial holiday.

I suspect that this year, many people will try to make up for the 2020 trainwreck by spending more money, buying more things, trying to find hope, peace, and comfort as the weather gets colder and we feel more isolated. The advertisers are already selling this message hard: you have to stay home, let's make it bigger and better! Buy all the things so that you can feel better, happier, jollier. But the truth is that buying more stuff and doing more things doesn't heal our world, our loneliness, our families, our communities. What if healing instead comes through less stuff, fewer activities, less spending, a simpler season focused more on actions of love and justice, on God's dream of mending creation?

Jesus is coming; what will he find when he comes? Will we be awake and building for the Kingdom: showing kindness to strangers and retail workers; caring for the poor; welcoming the outcast and rejected; reaching out to the lonely; comforting the grieving; tending to the sick; making peace with our co-workers and neighbors; extending patience with others and ourselves; living gently with creation on this planet; extending forgiveness; living simply and working for justice; showing mercy; sharing generously and spreading out our resources. It doesn't have to be complicated. It can be quite simple.

The Episcopal Church has published a wonderful Advent Calendar that can help us re-focus. It's part of Journeying the Way of Love: Practices for Jesus Centered Life, which is an initiative of Bishop Curry. Every day on the calendar, there is a short thing to do; a prompt to practice living more fully the Way of Love. We have posted this calendar on our Facebook page and website, so that you can print it or pull it up every day for the season of Advent. This is one simple way to practice building for the kingdom.

Friends, Keep awake! Jesus is coming. And that is reason for hope! Good news indeed!