

The First Sunday in Advent  
December 3, 2017  
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Isaiah 64:1-9  
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9  
Matthew 13:24-37

There's a story told about a couple who were walking down the street one beautiful winter evening. They were taking in all the sights and sounds of the season, delighted by the shopping centers and stores all festooned with light.

As they walked along, they came upon a church with a small, dimly lit crèche on its tiny lawn. "Look at that!" one of them said to the other, "Now even the churches are trying to horn-in on Christmas."

It's a sobering commentary on the times in which we live. Once upon a time, people looked to the Church to understand the changing seasons of the year and how to celebrate them. But these days, it seems the roles have been reversed ... and our ways here not only run counter to how the season is celebrated everywhere else, they're found wanting in the comparison.

I don't mean that to sound like the beginning of a rant. Partly at least, I understand the appeal of a less-restrained season. The rest of the world is singing the old familiar songs about how this is "the most wonderful time of the year," but we're telling tales about how it's the end of the world. "It's the hap-happiest season of all" out there, but a bit terrifying in here this morning.

And maybe it comes as a bit of surprise to realize that Advent isn't even about Christmas, at least not here at the start. We don't even have a crèche on our tiny lawn outside, and the crèche we have here inside is pretty much empty. Because, you see, we're not getting ready for Christmas so much as preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ. That's why today's gospel doesn't look to a star leading the magi; it speaks instead of stars that fall from the heavens.

I understand that this isn't what most folks want to hear. It's scary-sounding stuff. The thing is ... I don't think scaring us is the point of these readings. The words weren't said – and they weren't remembered, and then written down – to scare people. They were said to – and remembered by, and then written for – people who were already scared and undone.

Long before New Testament times, Isaiah lamented how wrong everything seemed in his time. He wrote the words we heard this morning, scholars think, shortly after the people had returned to their homes after a time of exile. But their homes were uninhabitable. Everything was left in ruins. The task of rebuilding their homes and a new society seemed too much. So he cried out for God to "come down" into the world because the world he knew had become too much for him to bear alone ... and God seemed so palpably absent in that world:

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence ...*

The writer of Mark's gospel lived in tumultuous and dangerous times. A generation after the death and resurrection of Jesus, rebels took over the city of Jerusalem and overthrew Roman rule. But the Roman army returned in force. They raped and they pillaged. They recaptured the city and they destroyed the Temple. It seemed like the end of the world. So Mark recalls these hope-filled words for a terrified people, a promise that Christ will come again:

*Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

So, too, the admonition that follows about the need for us to stay awake for the master's return isn't meant to give us nightmares. Canadian writer Jim Taylor offers another way to hear it:

When I go out, my dog doesn't know when "her master" will come home. So she lies by the door and waits.

Many of the biblical images of waiting are linked to fear – the unexpected thief in the night, the groom who censures the foolish bridesmaids, etc. My dog doesn't wait in fear, but in joyous expectation. Soon, things will be set right again. Soon, the family will be whole. Soon ...<sup>i</sup>

This is where we begin again this Advent, waiting and longing for God to come among us and set things right for us and our world.

That may not be what we want to hear. But it may be what we need to be told, if only to give us permission to acknowledge that we don't live in "the hap-happiest" of worlds. Songs of Christmas cheer artificially imagine a world that's all shiny and bright, but shopping trips and twinkling lights won't likely succeed in fending off all our anxieties and fears.

For there still are times for any of us when the challenges of life feel like too much for us to bear alone ... and perhaps God seems palpably absent. There still are times when we look around at a dangerous world full of reasons for us to be alarmed, especially after a year with devastating hurricanes in the Southeast and deadly forest fires here in the Pacific Northwest; there are still reasons for us to be terrified by global tensions and dismayed by national politics, especially when world leaders are seemingly more concerned with shows of force than with making peace, and political parties more concerned with special interests than with ordinary people.

The heart-breaking, impassioned prayer of Isaiah doesn't seem so remote in such circumstances. With Isaiah, perhaps, we still pray for God to enter into the history of this broken world ... and enter into our own histories, as well.

But there's also this point to consider: in Advent, we don't merely lament all that's wrong with this world and pray for God to make it all better someday. Advent also invites us to hope and long and pray and work for a better world in our own here and now.

In this morning's gospel, Jesus tells his followers to keep alert and to stay awake. It's a spiritual posture, an invitation to see things, to notice things we wouldn't notice otherwise. There are those who think of it in terms of what Buddhists call an attitude of mindfulness. It's a call, I think, to acknowledge that suffering and longing is part of life, and to discover that life is also full of hopes and possibilities.

After all, if we truly believe in Christmas, we believe that God is already in the world around us and moving within it ... and among us and within each of us. If we live this way, alert to the Christ who is already here, it seems more likely we'll notice all that is yet so holy.

A friend of mine recently shared a short poem by William Stafford that seems to fit the occasion.

It could happen any time, tornado,  
earthquake, Armageddon. It could happen.  
Or sunshine, love, salvation.

It could, you know. That's why we wake  
and look out — no guarantees  
in this life.

But some bonuses, like morning,  
like right now, like noon,  
like evening.<sup>ii</sup>

This Advent, I invite you to take some time, make some effort, to be mindful both of all that is wrong with the world and of the signs that hint at all that is so good in it, as well.

That's not a criticism of how these weeks of December will be celebrated between now and Christmas. I hope you will celebrate this season however it seems right to you. I don't imagine you'll keep Advent pure, unsullied by Christmas cheer, in any event. But I'm good with that. I'll even join you in that.

And yet, here at Trinity, we'll keep things a bit quieter ... at least on Sundays. Even if most folk don't look to us for how to mark the changing seasons of the year, we'll celebrate them in our old-fashioned ways. We'll practice looking for the Christ who comes among us: in the bread and the wine we share; and in the communion we share, one with another. And we'll hope that when we're on our own, shopping and wrapping presents and decking our halls, we might be a bit more alert to the stars and the sun and the moon ... and perhaps awakened to the God who is among us.

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<sup>i</sup> Ralph Milton @ <http://ralphmiltonsrumors.blogspot.com/2008/11/preaching-materials-for-november-30th.html> -- accessed November 30, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> William Stafford, "Yes," from *The Way It Is*, shared on Facebook on November 29, 2017, by Susan Campbell Church.