

Happy New Year! Our church year starts with the first Sunday of Advent and I wish you a happy and blessed Advent and new year.

Advent is a time of both “now” and “not yet.” We see Christmas decorations and hear Christmas carols all around us but if we ask a kid, any kid, “Is it Christmas yet?” they will emphatically and correctly tell you, “No!”

Here in the northern hemisphere, Advent is a time of death in nature, the ending of another year. Yet it is also the beginning of the church year, a time of birth at Bethlehem, a time when we know not whether, as William Willimon says, “to name what is happening among us as “ending” or “beginning” for it feels both as if something old is dying and something new is being born.”

There is that paradox reflected in our lessons for today: that a season we celebrate as one of joy and peace always begins with the end of the world. On the first Sunday of Advent, the lectionary gives us a glimpse of the apocalypse, or revealing. That’s what the 13th chapter of Mark’s gospel is actually called, the “Little Apocalypse,” Jesus’ discourse on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem, where he describes to his disciples the events that will take place upon his return.

Advent acknowledges that there is a deep wound in creation, that the world God created to be “very good” has somehow gone very wrong. And oh, how we know this, here in 2023. We have survived a world-wide pandemic, although many did not. We feel a deep-seated sense of being unsafe in this world. Violence, anti-semitism, islamophobia, wars and rumor of war, artificial intelligence - all leave us deeply uneasy. At our clergy conference last month, one of the topics the Bishop had us reflect on was how do we keep our churches and our families safe in the light of possible civil unrest during the election in 2024?

And now, today, our eyes and hearts are focused on those who live in the land many call Holy. There has been terrible loss of life, and the loss of future livelihood. Life will never be the same. Israel’s sense of security and strength is fractured. With the loss of foreign and Palestinian workers, their southern farms will never recover. Their hearts will never mend.

In Gaza, and to a some extent the West Bank, lives and infrastructure has been shattered. At least 80% of all buildings in Gaza are destroyed or damaged beyond

repair. There is no food, drinking water or medicine. Over 15,000 family members are dead and many are not yet buried.

This year, the West Bank city of Bethlehem, the birthplace of our Lord Jesus Christ, has declared that they will be removing all decorations celebrating the holiday of Christmas.

“Bethlehem Municipality crews announced the dismantling of Christmas decorations installed in the city's neighborhoods and removing all festive appearances in honor of the martyrs and in solidarity with our people in Gaza.” The traditional Christmas mass and prayers will still be observed, without the usual Christmas tree in Manger Square or festive lights 'in any part of the city', which sits just six miles south of Jerusalem.

The leaders of the major Christian denominations in Jerusalem, including our Anglican Archbishop Hossam Naoum, have called on churches in the Holy Land to refrain from organizing any “unnecessarily festive” Advent and Christmas activities in solidarity with the victims of the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In their statement the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem invited the roughly 180,000 mostly Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land to focus on the spiritual meaning of Christmas and called them to pray for “the relief of the victims of this war and for those in dire need,” as the period was filled with “sadness and pain.”

Diana Butler Bass reflects on our times “Advent 1 slaps us with the uncertainty and violence of human history.” From the get go, we’re told that there will be natural signs of turmoil, political distress, and chaos will hover over the earth, seemingly inescapable. Fear and dread will lead people to faint and some will feel as though the very foundations of heaven have been shaken by these world events.”

But the word apocalypse from the Greek does not mean “the end of the world.” Apocalypse translates most literally as an uncovering, an unveiling, a revelation. The Revelation to John is a prophetic dream or vision of God’s action in the world. An apocalypse provides insight; it uncovers divine truth and divine agency.

The Markan Little Apocalypse may be about the time of Jesus’ second coming, but it speaks also to is in the now as well as in the not yet. We are called to wait and

prepare for Christ's return in the future, whatever form that may take, but we are also to be aware of the many ways Christ appears in our present. Are we awake to see where Christ comes, breaking through lives and times to be present with us?

Jan Richardson writes, "Every year, Advent calls us to practice the apocalypse: to look for the presence of Christ who enters into our every loss, who comes to us in the midst of devastation, who gathers us up when our world has shattered, and who offers the healing that is a foretaste of the wholeness he is working to bring about not only at the end of time but also in this time, in this place."

And Marcus Borg says, "Advent & Christmas are about a new world...It is about the end of this era of war & violence, injustice & oppression. It is about the earth's transformation, not about its devastation. It is about a world of justice & peace."

So the message this First Sunday in Advent is not "the end is near." No, the message is, "God is near." Jesus says, over and over, stay alert. Watch. Wait. God is not missing. God is in our midst. Here. Now.

Again from Diana Butler Bass, "What is missing is our awareness. To be ready for Christmas is to be aware. To be ready to hear and to respond to the life-changing, life-defining question posed by God to you and to me. The very question asked of Mary two thousand years ago. Will you bring Jesus into this world?"

The lesson of the Second Coming is to be ready in our ordinary, every day lives to say yes. To say yes to bringing God's love, God's justice, God's forgiveness, God's healing into this world. To be always ready for Christmas."