

Year B Advent 1, November 29, 2020

✚ “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ... We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth ... for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father.”

✚ We begin the season of Advent and a new Church year with these despairing words from the prophet Isaiah. At this dark time of the year, when the days are so short, we reflect on the state of humanity and of our own failings and find it all quite distressing.

✚ Jesus doesn't let us off the hook as he talks about an apocalyptic end time: *'But in those*

days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”

✚ The season of Advent takes us from this darkness to the light of the Bethlehem star shining over the entrance into the world of what John, in his gospel, calls “*the light of all people ... the light [that] shines in the darkness.*” This light of course being the Christ-child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. But let's not rush to the end.

✚ More than any other year in my lifetime, we are waist high in that darkness. Between an ugly and frankly demonic political climate in the great countries of the world; a heightened awareness of the racism and hatred that permeates our own society; police killings of black people; the continuing suffering of our own indigenous people (many of whom can't even get clean water to drink); a global environmental crisis that is already causing more destruction through extreme weather events; and then there's COVID, killing hundreds of thousands of people around the world, wreaking havoc on economies – putting people out of work, closing down businesses, and isolating us from one another. These are dark times.

✚ We are hurting, and I think this Advent gives us the perfect moment to just be in this moment, to really confront what we're feeling – what we're going through and not run away from it, but reflect on where God is in all of this, for each one of us and for the whole world.

✚ Advent is a time of waiting – waiting in hope for something we know God is doing, and it is all too easy to skip to the end of the story and start singing Christmas carols and putting up the decorations. It is normal to want to escape this darkness, but the gift of Advent is that if we choose to follow its rhythm and slowly work our way through the story page by page, we will reach the birth of what John says, is this light that overcomes the darkness – the birth of Christ. We will reach it with such profound awe

and joy that as we get to that part of the story, we will find our hearts already alive in this hope, sharing in this light that is the very presence of God in and amongst us.

✚ Today, the Advent story begins in darkness. I encourage you to revisit the readings we've just heard (and are printed in the order of service) every day this coming week, and as you re-read them let the darkness of the present world and of your life come to the surface. Let the anger, the grief, the frustration, the sadness, the fear and whatever else comes up – let it be there, and let your prayer be: “*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ... O LORD, you are our Father.*” Vent your anger in prayer – give it to God. Scream or just weep in

loneliness or frustration and let God embrace you.

✚ Some days it feels like the end of time is here. It feels like: the sun has been darkened, the moon is no longer giving its light, the stars are falling from heaven, and maybe it even feels like the powers of heaven have been shaken and have been snuffed out. Maybe it feels like God has abandoned us or is powerless to do anything. Let this week be a week of prayer, lamenting these dark times and what it means for us, for our neighbours, and in fact, for this whole planet.

✚ Don't run away from this and go and pop the baby Jesus in your nativity set at home or get out your Christmas CD and forget this dark

time, for even in this dark time, God is with us and will give us gifts that we will only notice from the place of suffering.

✚ So far, I have only highlighted the despair in these scripture passages, and you'll find more in the Psalm as well. But, there is also hope – a distant hope at this point (kind of like a vaccine to rid us of COVID). There is a light at the end of the tunnel and God promises that as we enter this dark and scary tunnel that might even find us face to face with a train coming at us (a train with boxcars of COVID, global climate change, war, and poverty) – God promises that not even that train will keep us from the light ahead of us.

✚ Isaiah is having a bad day. It feels like God has abandoned Israel, and as a result, Israel has gone off the rails (they've fled the tunnel), or as Isaiah says, they have sinned and even their righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. Then he says this: *“Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.*

Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity for ever. Now consider, we are all your people.”

✚ There is hope as Isaiah remembers that God's pattern has always been to forgive; that God's pattern has always been to love the people she has created. Can we not trust that God will not abandon us, but in fact forgives and loves us.

✚ Even more strongly in Mark's gospel, having just listed off the signs of the apocalypse, Jesus says: *"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. 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."* The language is poetic and its meaning, somewhat cryptic; but the point he makes is that the power of God is coming, and not even the end of the world can stop that.



✚ So, he says be ready, prepare your hearts or you might miss the power of God even when it is born right in your own world – not in a place on a faraway hill – but right in front of you in the midst of your life: in a stable – right in your own backyard. He tells a short parable: *"It is*

like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."



✚ Keep awake! Be alert! That is what Advent is all about. It is about living the very ordinariness of our lives fully, painful as they might be. Don't distract yourself and numb yourself to sleep but stay awake. Advent is about searching even the darkest places of our lives in hope (a certain hope) that Jesus will be born, that our sins are forgiven, that even if it appears that a

train is coming down that long, dark tunnel, we need not fear. Let your heart be awake and alert in its hope and just notice that train without fear, notice the COVID pandemic, the racism, the politics, the climate and all of that – notice it as part of the life God has given you - for the light is still at the end of the tunnel.



In each of the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas, the tone changes slightly, the hope, which today is a distant light, becomes clearer and closer. We will meet different people along the way, all part of the fulfillment of this hope – this birth of God into our lives. As we move through Advent, the story develops and our hearts open up to this coming light. But once again, I challenge you to live Advent fully by prayerfully letting each week's Sunday

scriptures live in you for the whole week. Revisit them and let them address the dark times we are living in and allow yourself to feel whatever you feel and put it before God as a holy offering to be blessed. Keep your eye on the light, which will grow in us and get brighter with each week, and which like the star of Bethlehem, will lead us to the baby Jesus – God with us – the light that even the darkness cannot put out. More than any other Advent I have ever lived, I pray that we can all stick with this one, even the hard bits. I truly believe that there is great wisdom and healing for each one of us in our encounter with God through the teachings, stories and themes of Advent. Leave Christmas for Christmas time and enjoy the fullness of its glory then, but for now let's live a holy and healing Advent.