

**Advent 1
November 30, 2014**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

When I watch at the news and read the paper these days I feel out-of-balance. When I consider the pastoral concerns of many of the people of St. Cyprian's ... it is at times like these that I know many of you are feeling out-of-balance ... literally and figuratively. Out-of-balance ...that feeling that something in the world just doesn't seem right ... in the world outside and ... at times ... my own personal space inside. It is as if everything is tilted ... all the pictures hanging in the room need to be straightened.

When I was younger I had a habit of leaning back in a chair so that I was balanced on the two rear legs. Every once and a while I would lean too far and the chair would begin to fall backwards. Sometimes I ended up sprawled on the floor. But other times my legs would reflexively jerk out in front of me and I would regain my balance ... but my heart would skip a beat, I would have to catch my breath, and my stomach would do a flip. Maybe you've had the same sensation at times. You almost fall ... but you don't. However, your visceral reaction makes your heart skip a beat and it takes your breath away. Comedian Steven Wright ... with his dry sense of humor ... says that his whole life is like that.

At times I think I know what he means. The world around us not only throws me off balance at times, but it makes my heart skip a beat, and it takes my breath away and makes my stomach do flips. The nuclear threat from North Korea; a new tax bill voted on by the United States Senate that seems to favor the wealthy at the expense of the poor and middle class; the revelations ... of all sorts ... out of the White House; a slaughter of hundreds at a mosque in Egypt ... the world feels out-of-balance to me. Cancer, heart problems, broken bones, chronic pain ... the world in this little corner of God's vineyard ... St. Cyprian's ... feels out-of-balance to many of you as well.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," cries Isaiah in our reading for this first Sunday in Advent. "Restore us, O Lord of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved," pleads the Psalmist. "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," says the writer of Mark's Gospel, describing a state of catastrophe I wish I didn't recognize in the world around me. One can only hope that there is some relief in sight ... a light at the end of the tunnel.

That is the nature of this season Advent. There *is* a light at the end of the tunnel ... it is Christmas. But we have to go through the tunnel to get there. And it leaves us feeling a little out-of-balance.

According to the week's readings, we enter this first season of the Christian New Year with crying and mourning and weeping and grief. We enter Advent out-of-balance. "How long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" asks the Psalmist in desperation. "You have fed them with the bread of tears." During Advent ... as the world around us tries to escape from reality through self-indulgent consumerism, the church is telling us ... our faith is telling us ... to stop posturing and pretending. Our faith is telling us ... if we have any faith at all ... to get real.

"Our world is not OK," these Advent readings declare in stark terms, and the question of where God might be isn't OK, either. We are surrounded by evil and suffering, and we're not sure our faith can endure what our eyes reluctantly witness each day. Though we long for a Savior to rend open the heavens and come down, the very strength of that longing and hope often wearies our souls. Sometimes hope itself seems like a grind.

So why observe Advent at all? Lots of people in the world get along just fine without it. I believe we observe this season in preparation for Christmas because we see Christmas as much more than a birthday celebration for Jesus. It is about a divine presence tearing open the curtain that so often separates us from the truly sacred life we are meant to lead so that hope for a better world ... outside of us and inside us ... can be a reality.

Advent is a time of hope. Hope for something that is promised by God and anticipated, but not yet fully realized and present. During the first Advent, as Mary became aware of the growing life within her, hope grew literally and figuratively. God grew, unseen, yet present. Mary's swelling pregnancy suggested that the hope was well-founded and that God would indeed come.

Today, we wait with hope once more for God to be fully revealed in our lives, our communities, and our world. We hope for what we do not have, trusting that God's promises will come to full term, and be born kicking and screaming into our darkness. This is precious and requires us to pay attention to the signs of hope around us, as Jesus taught in Mark in this week's gospel.

The first step is to remember, acknowledge, and face where we have come from and where we are now. Then we look ahead, with hope, to what we long for and what God has promised. This week I met with Bishop John Howard in his office in Jacksonville. As many of you know, my relationship with Bishop Howard ... our relationship with Bishop Howard ... has not always been the best. However, this meeting could not have been more affirming. Bishop Howard had high compliments of our ministries, our spirit, and our growth. He said, "I think there always ought to be room in [the Episcopal] Church for a variety of voices and opinions." And he added, "I think [St. Cyprian's] is doing a good job on what it set out to do, so I commend [the congregation] for that, and you can count on me to let you continue to do it."

On this First Sunday of Advent I think Bishop Howard's words offer the congregation real hope for our expression of the Episcopal Church ... even when we sometimes feel out-of-balance ... even when we may feel like the tunnel is long and the light at its end is dim.

I believe that this season of Advent brings us gifts ... even if it seems dark. One of the gifts of Advent is the permission to tell the truth, even if that truth is laced with sorrow. We are invited to describe life "on earth as it is," and not as we mistakenly disguise with manic shopping in stores with decorated trees and Santa and elves.

Another gift of Advent is a discipline of waiting ... of delayed gratification. During Advent, we live with quiet anticipation in the "not yet." We stop rushing, and decide to call sacred what is yet in-process and unformed. As Paul puts it in this week's reading from his First Letter to the Christians in Corinth, we "wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

This is no easy task in the modern world, which rewards on-time arrivals, effort-cutting shortcuts, and quick-fixes far more than it does the meandering journey. The meandering journey is what the labyrinth in the Commons is all about. Anyone can walk across the path of the labyrinth straight to the middle, but our faith journey never seems to be that direct. That is why the path of the labyrinth wanders close to the center then out to the edge and back ... again and again until one finally arrives at the destination.

If the secular world speeds past darkness to the safe certainty of light, then Advent reminds us that necessary things ... things worth waiting for ... happen in the dark. Next spring's seeds break open in dark winter soil. God's Spirit hovers over dark water, preparing to create worlds. The child we yearn for grows in the deep darkness of the womb. In this season, we strive to find, "not perfection, but possibility."

Finally, Advent prepares us for the God who is coming ... a God who will turn out to be very different from the one we expect and maybe even hope to find.

I encourage you, in this Advent, to be patient. Be still. Hope fiercely. Deep in the gathering dark, something tender is forming. Something beautiful ... something for the world's saving ... waits to be born. The world may seem a little out-of-balance right now ... outside and inside. But it is just that awareness that some things are not "right" that is the opening for the sacred to come into our lives ... maybe in some scandalous way.

Amen.