

**Advent 1
November 29, 2020**

**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.**

I hope everyone had a good Thanksgiving, and that you were able to connect with those you love, even if you could not be with them this year.

Thanksgiving in the midst of the events of 2020 has taught me something I might not otherwise have learned ... even when I am surrounded by tragic events, high anxiety, and a holy anger for justice ... I can find reason to give thanks. One ... and only one of many reasons to give thanks is that 2020 has reminded me of a way of living where I am constantly aware of my own vulnerability, and I am constantly aware of the vulnerability of those around me. It has opened a door to seeing other people through a particular lens ... a compassionate lens. I give thanks for that insight ... one that I hope I don't forget as things begin to go back to what we used to call "normal."

If someone had told me back in March that we would still be in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic these many months later ... wearing masks, staying away from our loved ones, "attending" church over YouTube, attending book studies, Centering Prayer, and "Coffee Hour" by something called Zoom ... I would not have believed them. And, all of this while we have watched in horror as the global death toll continues to rise, and our hospitals have become overwhelmed, and families are being evicted from their homes, and lines at food banks are blocks long. Yet, here we still are. On the verge of another liturgical season and a new Church year, here we still are. Bewildered, grieving, fearful, and exhausted.

I am always struck by the difference between the Biblical passages we read during Advent, and the ones we shift to when Christmas finally arrives. This week, Isaiah longs for a Very Big God to do Very Big Things. Recalling the history of the Exodus, he asks God to once again do "awesome deeds" ... deeds that will make the mountains quake and the nations tremble. Come to us as fire, he pleads. Fire that kindles and burns, fire that sets the world boiling.

Who among us has not prayed such prayers? I imagine that I am not the only one. For the past nine months, my prayers have been as outsized as Isaiah's ... bring an end to the pandemic ... protect the most vulnerable ... strengthen healthcare workers ... help the unemployed ... spare the children ... save the world!

But why stop there? Why not go farther? Why not eradicate all illness? Clean up the mess in Washington D.C ... end world hunger ... root out corruption ... destroy systemic racism ... obstruct corporate greed ... protect this wounded planet before we ravage it past saving ... and

most of all shield us, O Lord, from our self-destructive selves. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

I don't believe I can ... or should ... stop praying these prayers. God is big, and when I come to God in prayer, dreaming of a just world, I know I'm dreaming a tiny version of God's own dream. But during Advent, I am asked to prepare myself for something else ... someone else. Someone so unexpected and so small, I'm tempted to either laugh or cry at the thought of him. The world is falling apart, my heart is exhausted, people are dying, and God chooses to send me ... a baby?

According to these readings on the First Sunday of Advent, we enter this season in lamentation. "How long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" asks the Psalmist in desperation. "Because you hid yourself we transgressed," cries Isaiah. During Advent, we stop posturing and pretending. We quit trying to make it OK that we can't find God ... or that God isn't listening ... or that God just doesn't care. We shed our greeting card assumptions about the Divine. We get real. We tell it like it is ... even to God.

"Our world is not OK," is what these Advent readings declare in stark, unflinching terms. God's apparent absence is not fine ... it hurts. It hurts so much we can barely breathe from the agony of it.

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 ... it is about a divine presence that could lead us so that hope for a better world ... outside of us and inside us ... can be a reality.

For the first few centuries of the Christian Church there was no season of Advent because Christmas was not even a holy day of any significance ... Epiphany and Easter were seen as the major feasts. It wasn't until 326 of the Common Era that the birth of Jesus was officially set on December 25. At the time, this was also the date of the winter solstice ... the shortest day of the year, and the longest night. Later, as the Church set out its liturgical seasons, Advent became the four Sundays before Christmas, and an Advent wreath became a symbol of the dialectic between light and darkness. As the days grew shorter approaching Christmas, more candles were lit to increase the light. Then, on Christmas, the center candle ... the Christ Candle ... was lit to indicate that light has triumphed. The days would grow increasingly brighter as the night grew shorter.

As I mentioned, 2020 has reminded me a way of living where I am constantly aware of my own vulnerability, and the vulnerability of those around me. It has opened a door to seeing other people through a different lens ... a compassionate lens. I believe that this Advent ... in 2020 ... also has some things to teach us, the first is the permission to tell the truth, even if that truth is laced with pain ... and sorrow ... and righteous anger. We are invited to describe life "on earth

as it is." We are called to speak the whole truth ... the whole truth about this pandemic ... the whole truth about justice ... the whole truth about our vulnerability ... but also the whole truth about our need for God. We need God to show up ... we need God to stay ... we need God to love us ... to hold us ... and restore us. We were created for intimacy with a just, gracious, and profoundly compassionate divine presence, and when that intimacy is missing, we suffer.

A second lesson of this Advent season in 2020 is really a discipline. It is the discipline of waiting. During Advent, we live with quiet anticipation in the in-between-time of "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 those 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, Amazon Prime next-day deliveries, and quick-fixes far more than it does the meandering journey. The meandering journey is what the labyrinth in our 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."

I wonder if years from now, when we look back on these bleak months of the pandemic, we will recognize these days of waiting ... waiting for a vaccine ... waiting for a cure ... waiting for a return to our normal social lives ... I wonder if we will recognize them as paradoxical treasures. Learning to wait for God is akin to learning a new form of physical exercise. Waiting is a muscle, and it has to be worked, toned, sculpted, and shaped over a sustained period of time. To sit and wait for God ... not in bitterness, not with cynicism, not in fake and frozen piety ... is serious spiritual work. But it is the invitation of Advent. To wait.

Advent ... this Advent like all other Advents ... 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 ... during this season of Advent ... 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.

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

I encourage you, in this Advent ... this Advent in the year 2020 ... 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 ... the world out “there,” and the world of our inner psyches ... may seem vulnerable. However, it is just that awareness that some things are not “right” that is the opening for the sacred to come into our lives.

Amen.