

Advent. It was Saturday night before the first Sunday in Advent and the pastor was not ready. Chagrined and not sure what the new church's Advent wreath would be like, the pastor took the four used purple candles offered by a nearby church, just to be ready in case they were needed... Not knowing what the Advent set-up would actually be, the pastor decided to gather some newspapers for the base of the wreath, just in case. The newspapers told of all sorts of troubling news: Budget cuts for our state; bombings; no deal in Congress regarding the fiscal cliff; murder-suicides; another fatality on the road; lots more layoffs..... What better place to put the Advent wreath - the symbol of God's Light shining in a dark world - than in a setting of bad news!! That's what it's about, you know: God so loved the broken and dark world that he gave his own Son to be the Light of the world, to bring tidings of hope, forgiveness and new life right where only sin, defeat and despair seemed to be in power.

We have lit a single candle today, and even if we get our wreath more properly fixed up for next week, we'll still be proclaiming exactly what we proclaimed today: That in Jesus Christ God has given Light and hope for those who find themselves stumbling in darkness.

In the 21st chapter of Luke, Jesus described a world in which it would seem impossible to survive. "... People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken....There will be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars...the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud, with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near..."

The gospel proclaims that no matter WHAT is happening in history or in our lives, GOD IS STILL IN CHARGE, and GOD IS YET BRINGING ABOUT THE REDEMPTION OF HUMANITY! God is coming! Take heed. Take God seriously. *Don't go to sleep the way so many in the gospel stories did.* Watch the large screens as well as the inner screens of your hearts, and be ready. (Being ready means using whatever you have in life to love God and to love others.) Make sure that you're not so saturated with the platitudes and seductive noises of our society that you have forgotten your need of God and God's need of you.

The Bible would shake us up with a larger view of life. It promises us and threatens us with the fact that God's ways are bigger than ours. In our recent history, Martin Luther King had a glimpse of something larger than what he could see outside his own windows. Mother Theresa must have grasped and been grasped by something larger than the pain at her feet and the discouragement of all around her. And sometimes, we who sit here today see something larger than our own needs or complaints. We see a larger responsibility on our parts as we try to understand what it means to be "Christian" in 2012 and beyond. And we see a larger hope for ourselves and for others as we read of the suffering of the world and experience our own pain. SOMEDAY, it will be all right, for we are in God's hands. Someday, justice will prevail. Someday, even if it's after death, our illnesses and failures will lose their power over our living.... God really is God.

Over the years I have asked people, "What are your hopes for Advent, in terms of God? What do you expect this season?" The replies have been various: "The strength to get through Christmas." "Better health.." "Meaning in my life." "Nothing. Nothing at all." "Hope." .... What are *we* hoping for? For what are we waiting?

Life in this world does not always turn out the way we wish it would or think it should. Each person here today could probably fill a page or more, listing the disappointments you've known in life, or the things you wish could be changed in this world. No more cancer. No more children starving for food or deprived of loving families. No more lawsuits. No more wars. No more unemployment. . Instead, everybody would have a fair chance at life; family members would always show respect and care for each other.. Near and far, there would be laughter, and joy and peace. Our lists could go on and on... No matter how imperfect our present world, though, we have the promise that God is with us, actively at work in our lives.

In the face of all time and times like ours, Christians dare to affirm that the Christ who is Lord in history will be Lord of everything at the end of history! In the midst of all "endings," such as layoffs, the loss of loved ones, no more money in the bank, or a terminal illness, the world looks down, perhaps with a mumble, perhaps in despair... Jesus challenges us to look UP, to renew our vision of "the Son of man coming with power and great glory..." Jesus challenges us to believe that underneath it all, all the fears and tears and hardships and meanness and unjust practices we know (within ourselves and outside of ourselves), God's purposes really will prevail.. The Master really will come... The everlasting arms really are at work on our behalf, and they will not fail! God's work in our world is not finished yet!

This may comfort us, but it does not get us off the hook. Hand in hand with hope, Advent brings tremendous challenge! Jesus did not say, "Y'all just lie around and do whatever you like, just be comfortable and merry until my Father finally brings paradise or a big Christmas to you..." Instead, he warned, again and again, **BE READY. WATCH OUT HOW YOU ARE WAITING, HOW YOU ARE SPENDING THE LIFE YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN!**

This warning needs to be heard by us as individuals and by us as a congregation! Writer/pastor/Bishop William Willimon once told the story of a man who with his family lived in a house almost next door to a pastor's church. I quote him: "The man's yard was always a mess. The children were poorly cared for. Rumors were that he got drunk on Saturdays, abused his wife, and cursed his children. Our church decided to help him. I visited the home. Some of the youth group went by and invited his kids to go on a trip to the mountains. The women's group asked the wife to the annual Day of Prayer. The man and his family came to church for a few Sundays, and then they stopped coming.

"That was the last I heard of him until a few months later, when I met him on the street. At first, I didn't recognize him, he looked so different. 'Joe, is that you?' I asked. 'Yeah, it's me,' he said, with a smile. 'At least, it's mostly me. I've changed.' I could see it. His whole physical appearance had changed. He looked great. Come to think of it, his whole yard had changed. It looked great. What had happened?

“He told me how, a few weeks earlier, a group had come by to pray with him after they had heard that he had been on a binge. A church group. But not from our nice, middle-class Methodist church. They were from a Fundamentalist church, the one over across the tracks, the pre-millennial, fire-baptized, washed-in-the-blood Bible church. They told Joe that if he didn't stop drinking and beating his wife that he was going to die, and burn forever in hell. They told him that God was coming to get him and that God was mad.

“They got his attention. They got him to their church, where they prayed for him by name and asked God to let him live just a little longer 'til they could get him saved. He got saved, turned inside out and upside down. He was redeemed.

“I said something about how I was sorry that our church had been unable to meet his needs, but that I was happy that their church had. Joe responded, 'Preacher, don't feel bad. Your church gave me aspirin. I needed massive chemotherapy.' ” (told by William Willimon)

Advent. Advent is hope and challenge for right now. It's not simply an event from the past to be remembered and celebrated.. It's not just an event telling us that someday Jesus will come back. It is ongoing hope in the here and now. Hope in One who promised us: "I am with you always. I will never leave you. I am your Shepherd now. I feed you now. I love you now." For this reason, we must watch out how we are waiting; for He calls us forth as the Body of Christ - imperfect church people though we are - to step out in that hope and to share it with others. Not shyly, but with life-changing power.

The whole point of Advent is not to trap us in a one-time scene from 2000 years ago but to free us to fully receive the present - the here-and-now- that God is offering to us.

Now I want to share a story about trusting God, since our Advent posture totally depends on how much we trust God. ... Long ago Oliver Cromwell's secretary was dispatched to the European Continent on some important business. He stayed one night at a seaport town, and tossed and turned on his bed, unable to sleep.

According to an old custom, his servant slept in his room, and on this occasion slept quite soundly. After a while, the secretary awakened his sleeping servant, who then inquired why it was that his master could not sleep.

The secretary replied, "I am afraid something will go wrong with my assignment."

The valet spoke, "Master, may I ask you a question or two?" "Yes, proceed."

"Did God rule the world before we were born?" "Most assuredly He did."

"And will God rule it after we are dead?" "Certainly He will."

"Then, Master, why not let God rule the present, too?"

Both men slept soundly the rest of the night. (From "Gleanings")

Today, as we begin Advent and also share the meal of Holy Communion, let us remember the promise of the Bible: God is with us; and the warning of the Bible: Watch out: God is doing something new... “In those days” has a claim on our lives *today*.

When things are dark or overwhelming, Jesus tells us to lift up our heads, to look up, for God is at work to bring about our redemption!

May each of us recognize God at work in our lives this season, so that we may receive and share the Light and hope of God's presence! Amen