

The Rev. Rose Anne Lonsway
The First Sunday of Advent
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
December 1, 2024

We are entering that time of the Christian calendar that makes us look rather odd to a lot of the other Christian denominations and the world around us. While the world at large is being swept up in preparations for Christmas – shopping, partying, running wild to get the best deals; here we are, Episcopalians in Advent, being called to be contemplative, to be quiet- to wait! Everyone else is singing Christmas Carols, decorating their churches, their homes – I do love to sing those Christmas carols don't you? But we wait – and we prepare.

What exactly are we waiting for? What preparations are we to make? Well of course we are waiting for the arrival of the Christ child, God incarnate in human form, made man as the Creed says. However when we really look at today's gospel, it appears that we are waiting and preparing for more than the birth of the child. Jesus begins to talk about signs that will herald His return. We are told of signs in the sun, moon and stars, the roaring of the sea, the powers of the heavens being shaken and how fearful people will be. All of this is very apocalyptic language; language we have learned to associate with the end times. And yet we are hearing about these things more and more frequently in our world aren't we?

Catastrophic weather events, huge fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, extensive destruction from significant flooding and loss of life. There is a pervading sense of foreboding about the inhumanity of humans toward those who don't believe as they believe, don't look like they look. Oh My! Oh My!!

Yet – when we really study Jesus words, Jesus doesn't tell us to prepare for the end. He is telling us that this means that what we have been waiting for – the Kingdom of God - is near and with the Kingdom of God comes our redemption. Jesus tells us to prepare for these times by standing up, raising our heads. **We are being told to live.** We are told to live with joy, hope, peace and love – and the candles of the Advent wreath are there to remind us to of this as that is what those candles are meant to represent – joy, hope, peace and love. We are to live without fear, to not let the worries of the times distract us from living as Jesus would have us live; loving God, loving our neighbor, caring for one another and changing the world.

Do you remember way back in 2012 when all the news was about the Mayan calendar predicting the end of the world?

Another prediction that didn't come to pass – but one person made a profound comment on a sign hung on a chain link fence: the translation of the Spanish it was written in said “I am not worried that the world will end in 2012. I am afraid it will stay the same.” (Feasting on the Word, Year C vol 1 p 241)

So the question becomes: How can **we** change the world? We change it by standing up and raising our heads with hope and with faith.

Faith that assures us that God is with us and loves us. That God will never abandon us no matter our circumstances and that the presence of Jesus is all we really need, because Jesus is always saving. As we read scripture, we see that where ever Jesus went salvation was present. And so it is for us: we can hold on to the belief that Jesus is present with us and therefore so is our salvation and redemption.

The prophet Jeremiah gives us an example of God's faithfulness to God's people – "the days are surely coming, says the Lord", a promise from God that Judah and Jerusalem would be restored.

Jeremiah is talking to a people whose homeland; Jerusalem, was invaded by the Babylonians, a people whose homes and land was destroyed, including their Temple in 587 BCE. The people are now living in captivity in Babylon. Life as they knew it is completely destroyed. They must have been wondering where God was in all of this. Had God abandoned them?

What happened to the promise, the covenant that God made with King David that the Davidic line would always lead the people? This was a people in deep despair.

Yet through Jeremiah, God answers with God's promise that Israel will be restored, and that righteousness and justice will prevail. **A day is surely coming** – faithful words from a faithful God that carry through to the words of Jesus and follow us today as we begin this season of waiting and preparation. We wait and prepare by faith, by prayer, by belief in the righteousness of our God and by finding ways to **be** – to be faithful, to be righteous and just in our lives, in our dealings in the world.

As we wait for the signs, the celebration of the birth of our Savior, as we scan the horizon for the storms of this life, consider this: As we wait in this quiet time we pray to Jesus, the Jesus who never really left us.

While we may not see Jesus walking this earth, God is with us, every minute of every day. We have not been abandoned, but we are called. The Psalm for today gives us words to respond to that call as a prayer.

As we pray for peace: To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;
my God, I put my trust in you; *

Show me your ways, O LORD, *
and teach me your paths.

As we pray for hope: Lead me in your truth and teach me, *
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.

As we pray for love: Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love, *
for they are from everlasting.

remember me according to your love
and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.

As we pray for justice: Gracious and upright is the LORD; *
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.

He guides the humble in doing right *
and teaches his way to the lowly.

As we pray for joy: All the paths of the LORD are love and faithfulness *
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

What beautiful and heartfelt words to draw us to our God! These words call us to our salvation through the love, mercy and grace of our God. These words assure us that God has not and will not abandon us. No matter the sin, no matter the failure, our God walks with us and holds us in God's loving space.

The words of Kathryn Matthews Huey (Sermon Seeds Nov. 29, 2015) paint a picture of what following Jesus can look like, what we are called to be in this time of waiting as well as throughout our life as a faith community. "As we pray we can turn our hearts to all of God's precious children and open to them a place, a community, a church, where the flames of hope can be fanned into the fires of justice and peace, into the warmth of a spiritual home for those who have lost hope that they would ever find a place of such beauty and kindness, such tenderness and fierce hope, a welcome home in which to grow their faith by participating in the dream of God. We can be the church that loves worship and learning, the church that is open and generous, full of feeling, beautiful and just, a church that longs for, and draws our strength from the dream of God."

That is how we wait; that is how we prepare!

So in this time of quiet reflection, of waiting and preparation - there are no Advent police that will monitor to see if we are singing those Christmas Carols or putting up a tree. I don't think that God is going to strike us down for participating in the seasonal fun and spirit.

Just remember that we have other work to do – we are in waiting mode – waiting not only for the coming of the infant Christ Child, but anticipating the second coming of Jesus. The time is surely coming! And we can still do the waiting work, the praying work, the work that leads to righteousness and justice in this world as our faithful and ever-present God expects us to do. Amen.