

I have to admit that I do not yet feel like it should be the first Sunday of Advent. That is probably in part because I spent last week in warm, sunny Arizona, where I hiked in a t-shirt, drove around with the windows open, and didn't need wool socks; although walking the dog when it was a refreshing 22 degrees here yesterday should have snapped me out of that. But in spite of having an Advent calendar waiting to be opened and presents piling up in the closet, I don't feel ready to *get* ready for Christmas. Maybe it's because too many people I know are hurting and grieving right now. There is too much violence, war, and unrest in the world. We are burdened by too many worries and too much fear of things that are going to get worse before they get better. There is too much darkness to be illuminated by just stringing lights on a tree; too much is torn and tattered to merely paper over it with gift wrap. But that is why we need an Advent that is more than a countdown of days until Christmas.

The lectionary seems to agree with me, that it's not quite time for Christmas cheer. We might have expected an angelic announcement or the song of a pregnant virgin to begin our Advent anticipation, but instead we start with a chapter of Luke, near the end of the gospel, encouraging us to be vigilant in the face of events that will, Jesus says, cause people to *faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world*. Well. Doesn't that sound grand. Jesus teaches his disciples about expectation: *as soon as the fig trees sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near...* We talked a couple of weeks ago about how the gospel writers recorded these prophetic words of Jesus *after* the great revolt, after the destruction of the temple, after the defeat and death of so many of God's people in Judea. The worst things one could imagine, things even worse than what one could imagine, not only were going to take place, but already had taken place; yet Jesus says: *stand up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near*.

As a rule, Lutherans and those who interpret scripture similarly to us do not like to get too tangled in the weeds of prophecy, guessing if this verse or that passage could be a coded description of contemporary events. We leave it up to others to predict, frequently and so far 100% inaccurately, the timing of the return of Christ and the end of the world. After all, Jesus himself says that nobody, not even he, knows the timeline. Jesus claims *this generation will not pass away until these things have taken place*, but he also says be alert, be on guard because these things will happen *for all who live upon the face of the whole earth*. When these things will happen or who will witness them is not as important as what they mean, which is that the kingdom of God is near.

We, who are answering the lifelong call of living as subjects in God's kingdom should *yearn* for its coming. So even these strange signs are cause for hope, not fear.

Advent is waiting and watching, but not just for the future. If we train our eyes only on the horizon, we are unlikely to see what is going on right around us. We wait for whatever lies ahead, but we are called to live faithfully in the meantime...however mean that time turns out to be. So we can think of these and other apocalyptic signs not as harbingers of a scary future, which they're not if they signal the coming of the kingdom for which we wait. Instead, we can think of these words as a promise, that Jesus, Emmanuel, God With Us, sees us fainting, *now*. We, and every generation, cry out for peace in the midst of chaos and hope when the way seems hopeless. The message isn't, *Boy, you think things are bad now, just wait to see how much worse it's going to get before it's all over*. Instead, Jesus reassures us that while we're still in the middle of the mess, he understands our fear and foreboding and shoulders the weight of our worries; not only *will* he come to us, he *has* come for us, and he *continues being* God With Us, even as the seas roar.

Advent acknowledges the struggle of living in that in-between-time; already, but not yet. Jesus already came to us in person, in the manger in Bethlehem; he already changed the world... and yet...there is so much—in our personal lives and in our communities, both local and global—that still needs healing and wholeness and redemption, so much that shows us we're not there yet. We live between promise and fulfillment, clinging to Jeremiah's bold proclamation, *the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made...for justice, for righteousness, for safety*. That doesn't sound like the world we live in, not yet...but still we hope in the god who keeps promises. We live a faith that says everything will come out right in the end, so if it isn't yet right, it isn't yet the end.

If, like me, you've suddenly found yourself in Advent, not at all ready for the trappings of Christmas, maybe that itself is a gift. It's the gift of seeing what is broken that needs to be healed. It's the gift of searching for where God is already at work, giving us hope for what is possible. It's the gift of acquaintance with dark places, because that means we know where to reflect the light of Christ that first shined on us. Advent is not for passive waiting; it's not even for resigned yearning; it's for active, fervent preparation. We're not supposed to feel ready yet, because there is so much yet to do—so much besides tree trimming and cookie baking and gift wrapping, so much to make this world more closely conform to God's vision for us and the whole creation. May we not be caught unexpectedly but found in eager expectation, already busy with the just and righteous work of the kingdom of the God who is surely coming.