

Hope

Mark 13:24-37 Isaiah 64:1-9

We are now entering into the season of Advent again. That time every year when we talk a lot about “waiting,” “anticipating,” and “keeping awake and ready.” And it’s the time when pastors around the world struggle once again to try to make this season unique from the more popular Christmas season that follows. But this year, maybe more than others, I think we have a better understanding of what it means to “wait and anticipate.” After all, that’s largely what 2023 has meant for us.

We’ve been waiting for end of the Ukraine/Russian war, the Israel/Hamas war, for COVID, flu, RSV, personal health to get better. We’ve been waiting for a return to “normal” from many perspectives. With all the drama and stress that this year has brought, we may think it redundant to be told to “keep awake and vigilant” as we are already operating in a state of sleep deprivation and over-caffeination...Also consider how we seem like a culture that’s programmed to only work in high gear, to only be able to function at maximum capacity. From that perspective also, it seems ludicrous to tell us to “stay awake.” That’s what we have become masters of, in an overstimulated, social media driven world, that still promotes the excitement of Black Friday consumerism.

But let’s be clear, while the world’s business may seem to be pointed to Christmas, it is seldom pointed toward the coming of the Christ child. As Advent progresses, the number of shopping days left before the big day offers a countdown that stresses us out and keeps us up late. These days we are pushed into extra hours of wakefulness...during a liturgical season that annoyingly presumes that...we might be asleep. No wonder we often tune it out, like teenagers hearing a parent’s repetitive lecture and knowing that mom simply does not understand...But, of course, God does understand.

In this way, the Scripture from long ago reads who we are, not the other way around. During Advent, we are indeed asleep to much of what matters. Like people who have lived by the train tracks for years, we no longer hear the sound of the train. For many of

us, after years in church, we get used to the noise of Advent, to the coming of Christ, so much so that we no longer notice it. Or if we do, it no longer jolts us awake and has become instead a low, dull rumble. For new members who have been away from the church return during the season experience Advent with delight and wonder as the purple vestments and Advent wreath appear, but then after a few years, these signs of the season become mere decoration.

Yet for me at least, this year seems a little different. What were the routine and rote traditions and rituals in the past have faded into the background these past few years. I now feel a sense of loss at what was, and wonder if I will ever be able to recover the “normal” that seems so distant...During this time meant to promote hopefulness, we often find ourselves feeling hopeless. So can our current crises refocus our attention back to the true meaning and purpose of Advent?

This morning’s scriptures are a testament to the promise that this season holds. Both readings were written for people who were going through particularly tough times. In Isaiah, the readers were those Jews who had been exiled to Babylon. They had lost everything, their homes, their Temple, even their God, it seemed. Yet they hold on to the promise that God will forgive and redeem them; that they are clay - yet to be molded to God’s purpose. In our gospel lesson from Mark, the audience would have recently witnessed the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the second Temple, and most would be living in the exile of the Diaspora, permanently separated from all that had defined their lives and faith.

Drawing from the apocalyptic imagery of Daniel, Jesus gives a dramatic image of end times and judgement, and all too often we get caught up in those signs as a road map for the end of things, and try to seek hope in seeing ourselves as the last generation before Christ’s return. To read these texts as timelines of the future is to miss the point. It’s not

the specific details that matter, but the overall promise of God's providence. Bad things will happen in our lives, we will struggle, sometimes seemingly without the promise of redemption. But these stories always end with God's resolution. The faithful are redeemed; things are made right in the end. That is the hope to focus on.

Much like the ancient Judeans, we too seem to have lost our way of life. We have that same sense of loss and hopelessness of being exiled from much that is "normal." But in these stories, we can find comfort that we are not alone, that others have gone through similar circumstances and come through the other side. When we read the stories of suffering and tribulation in the Bible, too often we focus on what we consider the senseless suffering, and lose the promise of the redemption that follows. We miss the hope part. And even more tragic, we also miss the role we play in bringing about that hope. That is why I like this passage from Isaiah so much. We are God's clay. We are to be molded to be vessels that carry the faith and the hope of that faith. The promise that we are not forsaken, that God is at work, through us, to bring hope.

The question is, will we allow ourselves to be transformed into something we may not anticipate. We can wallow in the loss of what was, or step into the promise of what can be. Times like these are watershed moments. Will we seek God at work in new ways and join that work, or will we just give up in wistful resignation? Will we find ways to spread hope, or succumb to the hopelessness so prevalent all around us. I hope and pray that together we allow ourselves to be molded into the body of Christ, the beacon of hope, our Creator calls us to in this time and place, a shape that may be much different from the old "normal" we pine for. May our journey be another chronicle of redemption and hope in the story of faith. Amen.