

First Sunday in Advent, A
Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
November 27, 2022

Nobody ever knows exactly what's coming next.

A friend of mine once received a surprise check in the mail -- for \$10,000! It was sent by a long-ago acquaintance, a woman she made friends with during her daily bus commute in another city. Now the acquaintance was elderly and had resources to share, and she took pleasure in being generous with someone she fondly remembered.

I know someone who walked into a bar to watch a presidential debate and ended up meeting the woman he would marry. He said he knew it right away! Another friend got an unexpected call one day from a head hunter, recruiting her for a new job that ended up being just the challenge she needed.

We never know what's coming next. What's just around the corner could be something to grieve or something to celebrate. One morning there is terrible news of another mass shooting, but other days we wake up to positive reports of elections conducted freely and fairly, with no violence. We feel there is reason to hope.

Scripture recalls that back in Noah's time people were doing normal things, eating and drinking and celebrating, never suspecting a huge flood was about to cover the land. And we recall that not so long ago we were all doing normal things, eating and drinking and celebrating, never imagining a global pandemic would paralyze the world. And we're still not finished with that chapter. We are still finding our way into what comes next.

Today's gospel reading speaks to the unexpected, and I wonder if our own experience with unexpected change can teach us something this Advent and lend us some wisdom. I honestly don't know what any of us could have done to prepare for something as big as pandemic, but I do feel we're beginning to understand what has helped us get through these unpredictable times, and I believe it can help us stay alive to faith and alive to God's promises in this Advent season.

Advent is a time of preparation and expectation and hope. A time to be spiritually awake. We are preparing for Christmas, but in the big picture we're also preparing for our Savior Christ to return to earth and heal and restore all creation. Just as God brought this world into being, one day God will gather all things together and bring time

as we know it to a fruitful end. Nobody knows the day or the hour. It will be another amazing surprise, another bend in the road for all of us. Advent calls us to keep awake and pay attention as we wait and watch for Christ to come back to us.

Some Christians are afraid of Christ's return, afraid they won't measure up to God's judgment. But we're not meant to be fearful. We are meant to welcome it, because the coming of Christ will release creation from all its pain – release everyone from the burdens of hate and abuse, the burdens of sickness and grief and oppression and violence. In the words of our Holy Communion liturgy: *we wait with hope for Christ's coming again, when this whole creation will be transformed and made whole.*

It's not a passive kind of waiting, as if to say, "God's gonna rescue this world someday, God's got it covered, so what I do today doesn't matter." Instead, we're meant to cultivate hope, stay open to each other and open to God, and stay actively invested in things that matter.

Being spiritually awake is a lifestyle. Being spiritually awake means being truly available to relate with other people, to really listen, to really care. Being awake spiritually means cultivating a view that's larger than our own personal interests – and paying attention when we don't like what we see. In the light of Christ's return, we notice the difference between things as they are today, and things as they should be – and will be, when God restores all things. Being awake – even "woke" – to injustices that are perpetuated generation after generation, so we can become part of repair and healing. God keeps us longing for and working for what is life-giving, not death-dealing. Because a future is coming that nobody has ever seen before, God setting things right through love and power. God is never satisfied with the status quo—God always has a more just and true and beautiful reign to bring about.

"Keep awake!" is a great word for us at this stage in the pandemic/endemic trajectory. The Covid experience has taken a lot out of us, and we're not completely recovered. In so many ways our society is like the groundhog that's just making its way above ground after a long winter's sleep, still blinking in the sunlight and rubbing its eyes. People are emerging at their own rates, and this Advent season can be a beautiful opportunity to reset.

Keep awake! God encourages us. *Keep awake to what you see around you -- keep awake to the hope I have for you, hope beyond anything you can see right now.*

God comes in Christ to show us the shining love at the heart of this universe, love which is meant for everyone. How will we center ourselves in God's love and promise this Advent?

Traditionally we observe Advent by carving out times for reflection amid the busy activities. We light a candle on our Advent wreath. We pause for times of silence prayer for others or that prayer that has no words, simply resting at peace in God's presence. Perhaps we choose a devotion to read, or a book of the Bible, or some other material that feeds the spirit. We approach these days thoughtfully and intentionally, because we know this season is not only about consumerism or jolliness or even family – it's about God's saving love healing the universe. So we change our habits to create space for recognizing this beautiful reality so much larger and wiser than ourselves, God's redeeming and renewing love.

I have a hunch that this year we'll be joined in these gentle practices by many who do not identify as people of faith. For all the damage pandemic has done, I have a hunch it's also helped us learn some things about being human creatures, and what is needed to nurture the soul, and how much our spirits need this intentional care.

I recently viewed an art installation by Wendi Yuling, on exhibit at the Armory. The artist asked Portlanders to describe rituals they took on during Covid isolation in order to care for themselves or care for their community. They also named rituals they would keep to carry them forward. People wrote these rituals in sharpie on blue surgical masks which the artist has arranged all across a long wall, as if they were birds with wings taking off into flight, symbolic of the future that is still being shaped. I was struck by how many of these life-promoting rituals were similar to our Advent practices.

During isolation, people found meaning and renewal in simple things. Caring for plants, taking long walks, listening to music, sitting in silence and looking at the trees while sipping coffee. Just stopping to breathe was life-giving. Also meditating, praying and giving thanks. And intentionally reaching out in a simple, caring way—checking on elderly neighbors, contacting friends, zooming with family.

Moving forward, the artist highlights rituals to keep on making space for spirit. Rituals of journaling or even playing a musical instrument as a spiritual practice. Reflecting in nature. Meditating. Keeping Sabbath. Walking-- for the joy of being alive! Caring for the self and listening, really listening to others. Making space for hope by imagining a new world with diverse voices, "imagining liberation together and finding the next good step."

That sounds like Advent to me. The holy imaginers who worked with the artist are not necessarily people of faith, but they define rituals we can all embrace. Rituals to keep our spirits open to one another and open to God.

This is our spiritual work as human beings, and Advent is a time that calls us to reach deep into these wells of hope and stay awake to the mysterious, beautiful and compassionate ways God is moving in this world. Awake to the promise, the beautiful promise, that this world and our lives are now and always in God's hands. Here's wishing all of us a blessed Advent. Amen.