

First Sunday in Advent, B  
Isaiah 64: 1-9  
I Corinthians 1:3-9  
Mark 13:24-37

Rev. Melinda J. Wagner  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon  
November 29, 2020

We have a new member of our household-- well sort of. This is a gizmo that came to us from the house of Aaron's mother Pat, who died last month. It's called a Roomba, a little floor-vacuuming robot that Pat used to keep her kitchen floor clean after it became difficult to bend down and sweep on her own. It kind of seems alive, because it just wanders around on its own, cleaning up the floor, and whenever it gets full or runs low on power, it heads back to its charging base in the kitchen all by itself. You can even program it to run at a certain time each day or week, and it'll take care of everything on its own. Kinda creepy, but also kinda cool. I must say it vacuums more thoroughly than I do. The only problem is, it scares the heck out of our dog, he thinks it's a dangerous invader!

Well, I never in a million years expected to have a robot vacuuming my floors, but these days we are all adapting to new things, including the way we take care of our households.

Whether our household is a small apartment for one, or a house shared with others, we all are managing differently these days – by necessity. And, Congratulations! We did it! We made it through Thanksgiving under Covid. We zoomed, we texted, we masked, we distanced, we ate outdoors, we cooked turkey for one or ordered out something completely different. My niece in Minnesota even pulled off a home-isolation potluck with her young adult friends. Each person cooked one item (potatoes or turkey or pie), and one friend drove around and collected all the food, dished up individual plates with a little of each delicacy, drove back to deliver the plates to everyone, then they ate together as a group on zoom. Genius!

We figured it out. We learned we can be inventive in honoring these meaningful seasons. We can learn to focus, not on what we don't have, but on what we do have and what we can do. To focus more on faith, to thank God for everyday gifts and small victories in hard times.

And now we have yet another season before us, the beautiful season of Advent, the season of hope and expectation and holy longing. And Advent could be just exactly what we need, to connect with God and prepare for the deep good news of Christ's birth. When nothing is the same, the longing of Advent speaks profoundly to us. We are very much aware of what we're missing, yet Advent gently reminds us of what still remains

and always will endure, the gift of God's love to us and all this world. We light one Advent candle today, next week it will be two. And as the Advent light gradually grows, we ask God to center us in goodness and love, so we don't just manage to somehow survive the weeks ahead, but will be refreshed along the way, encouraged by God's promises, anchored in faith and trust and hope and courage.

Today scripture describes us as a household in waiting. Jesus tells the simple story of a household whose master has gone away, but will return soon. The question is, How will the household conduct itself in the meantime, in the waiting time and the watching time? Each person will stay awake. They'll keep occupied with the tasks that belong to them. They will take care of the household, responsibly, creatively, faithfully until the master returns, to hold them accountable.

That simple story of the household brings it right home, for us. It doesn't try to describe how the master, Jesus, will return one day. But it reminds us powerfully that we are part of the master's household, now and forever. We can think of ourselves as the *household of humanity*, put in charge of caring for this earth and the whole human family. The work we do, the people we influence, the communities we build and the needs we meet, all of these are part of being faithful until our Lord returns.

Our household tasks might not seem like much. We pay loving attention to the people near us. We do daily work that contributes to the greater good in some way. We share what we have with people in need. We use our political power to help shape a more just and life-giving society. We do our part in God's household. And we don't often get immediate results or rewards. The progress may seem excruciatingly slow. Sometimes we might feel like giving up.

I read this week about Anna Balcom, a rising star on the ICU staff at OHSU hospital, a former Nurse of the Year in fact. But now she is exhausted from months of pandemic service and has decided to leave the ICU for a less stressful position in another ward. Anna said, *"I feel so much guilt, I feel like I'm abandoning my battle buddies. But it all became too much. .... I thought I was a lifer in the ICU. But it sometimes feels like we're asked to do the impossible. We're risking our lives, but sometimes it feels like we're beating our heads against the wall."* (*Oregonian*, 11/25-20) For her own health, to preserve her ability to serve others, Anna is making a hard but necessary decision. And it's a reminder for all of us to keep supporting our frontline and medical workers however we can, including fervent daily prayers for strength and stamina and health for every one.

For some people, just getting through the day can require adapting and digging deep. Very interestingly, a study in San Francisco, shows many older adults are doing this really successfully, finding creative ways to keep away the loneliness that could be disabling. At age 85, Sukari Addison has congestive heart failure, high blood pressure, and not much money, but she doesn't live in fear. She spends most days alone in her rented room but keeps alert by learning new things on her computer. On difficult days, she pulls on her gloves, tightens her mask, and strolls the city, chatting with people on the street. Sukari says, "We are in the middle of a really big change now. But I've been through changes before—a lot of them, as an African American." She says her motto is not to worry about things she can't control. (NPR, 11/26/20 *There's No Stopping These Seniors*)

We are all going through a really big change now, so big we can scarcely comprehend the forces swirling around us. Historians years from now will still be trying to figure it all out! But the most important forces, we do understand, as people of Christ. And what we know eases the worry or fear.

We understand that God is the final authority over this household of humanity. And God is the only power that truly can and will change this world. We understand that God stands for healing, teaching, caring for the poor, and nonviolence. God's authority rests in forgiveness, generosity, reconciliation, and self-giving love. What matters most as we move through each day is having full faith and confidence that God's reign of love and justice is coming, it's on its way, and we are part of it.

You and I have everyday household tasks to accomplish for God, as citizens, as neighbors, as compassionate people, as parents, children, friends. Promoting the things that matter to God – compassion, justice, reconciliation, peace – everything that serves to renew the human family. And who knows how we are building up the household of God, the just and loving reign of God, every day.

This is the work of Advent. In this steady, patient, confident way, we wait and watch for Christ. We keep awake to God's love, and God's presence, and God's good purpose for all of us. We keep awake to the God-significance of everyday living, and we trust that the Master of the household is working through us for God's ultimate good. Now, and in the days to come, even to that final day when we will meet God face to face.

My friend Paul tells the story of how, when he was a little boy, he did not want Jesus to come back any time soon. And he took our Bible passage seriously that "about that day or hour no one knows." So around age 6, he devised a plan. Before he went to bed each night he would say, "Tomorrow's the day Jesus will come back!" In his 6-year-old mind,

he was creating an insurance policy – because he reasoned that if little Paul “knew that day” was tomorrow, then Christ could not return and catch him unawares.

Well, Paul is far beyond the age of magical thinking now. Having lived more than seven decades, he is no longer fearful of those final days. Now he says his prayer is, “Come quickly, Lord!” with a deep expectation and trust that there is something much greater to come for all of us. We are only getting a flavor now of what God has in store for creation. And Paul says, what is coming will take our breath away!

In the midst of our Advent longing, I pray a measure of that beautiful, expectant hope for every one of us. In Christ’s name, Amen.