

Let us pray: Your word is a light to our path and a lamp to our feet.  
May our hearts be open to your word for us today. Amen.

This week the church gets a head-start on the rest of the world by beginning a new year today. Advent Does not mean, “Christmas - hurry up!”

There’s been some thinking that the church might not be efficient.  
We think it is, with our seasons and celebrations, our liturgical colours,  
our sacraments and bulletins....all following in an orderly, timely fashion.  
But this is our doing, not God’s.

At this time of year we want to honour the Advent tradition of waiting, but really,  
most of us (children) just wish Christmas would hurry up and get here!  
Even though we’re used to being busy, we can’t wait for the joy of family and  
friends, music, pageants, Christmas potlucks, receiving a gift from a loved one.  
Christmas - hurry up!

But this year our Advent and Christmas preparations, our “getting ready”, will be like  
never before. The list is long of the things we won’t be doing this year. The things in  
other years we planned for, shopped for, decorated for, especially sharing meals with  
our families and friends....things we took for granted. But this year we realize we  
should never take Christmas for granted, but we should know Christmas comes,  
every year. Covid has brought so many unbelievable hardships to the world this year,  
we just want Christmas to be the way it was. We want everything to be the way it was.  
We’re tired of waiting.

The Israelites and the early Christians were waiting for something, too.  
The Israelites were waiting for God to come and help them.  
The early church was waiting for -they weren’t quite sure what.  
We are waiting for a vaccine....waiting with expectation.

The season of Advent has a particular quality and feeling about it. It's not the inward journey that Lent can be, but there is a feeling of expectation. But waiting with anticipation and expectation can also bring a feeling of dread, as Nora Gallagher wrote, "Dread and hope, two good words to describe the mood of our readings for today.

The Isaiah passage has a feeling of lament- Isaiah's people, God's people, are suffering. (*The people of Israel have recently returned to Palestine, and are struggling to rebuild the temple and put their community back together.*)

Isaiah is pleading... "Where are you God?  
Why don't you tear open the heavens and come down  
and fix this awful situation we're in?"

Where is God now?

Remember, God;  
Remember when you used to make promises to save us and look after us?  
Remember when you used to come and intervene on behalf of the people of Israel,  
...your people?  
Remember; we are the children, and you are the Loving Parent;  
we are the clay, and you are the Potter;  
we are the vine that you, yourself, planted and watered.

How long do we have to wait for you to give ear, stir up your might, restore us,  
turn again to let your face shine upon us?

The people trust God enough to plead for help.  
They are in dire straits, and in pain, and want God to know about it!  
But there doesn't seem to be any activity coming from the God they know.  
They have a long history of God coming to their rescue when they're in trouble.  
They have come to expect certain things from God;  
defeating Pharaoh, great waters opening up, bread from heaven,  
They had certain expectations of God.  
And there's that Advent word again...expectation.

We all have our own ideas about how we think God should act.

What do we expect from God?

Like all of our ancestors in faith, we all stand before God in "helplessness"  
at one time or another. Sometimes there is very little, or nothing at all, we can do  
about our situation. All that is left to do...is to call for help.

Anne Lamont has famously said we only need two basic prayers;

"Help me. Thank you."

The first line of the reading from Mark says,  
“But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened, and the moon will, nor give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken...”

Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple, and tells some of the disciples about the end the age. There are a series of warnings about false predictions. He tells them, in no uncertain terms, they are to stay awake and alert. They must watch and wait.

The end-times visions in this writing are recycled for today’s context so we can understand how situations today..might be similar to situations in ancient times, and how to be faithful people of God in our own time.

The readings today both have the theme of waiting. In the Advent season we’re always waiting. As we get closer to the coming of the Christ-child Mark tells us to be awake, ready, patient. Isaiah 64 words say the same thing;  
The people of Isiah are waiting for God.  
The people of Mark are waiting for Christ....they think...

With cries of, “Where are you, God?” between the noise of Christmas Busy-ness and Silent Night, we are reminded that, yes, Jesus is coming...  
Judy Siker says, “We don’t need to get lost in the details, better to concentrate on being ready.”

We know sin is something that moves us farther from God...that separates us from God. We might even see the reason for the blue liturgical colour of Advent, blue is the colour of lament. But what moves us closer to God?  
There is hope in the later verses when there is a change in the writer of Isaiah’s tone of voice. The writer reminds us all that we are children of God;  
clay in the potter’s hand...before we come to God with that list of expectations, a wish-list.

And it’s clear; Advent is about the nearness of God...but we’re not quite sure how far. When we feel that God is far away and unreachable, maybe it’s our instinct, that’s off...We all long to feel God near us, to see, to understand, to know that God is “down here” on earth.

No matter how bad things get, we know that we, and all the earth, belong to God, and whether we recognize it or not, God does tear open the heavens and come down. Sometimes God breaks into our lives quietly, without much fanfare so we almost miss it....at other times there's a dramatic public event...

Advent comes to wake us up,  
to open our eyes and hearts,  
to shake up our expectations,  
to remind us- we are clay in the potter's hand.  
Advent also calls us to a time of self re-examination;  
a time of hope, a time of anticipation and wonder.

As we begin to wait,  
wait for God's miracle that is yet to come,  
remember  
God is already here.

Prayer