

## Year B | Advent 1

Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18, I Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

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St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Hamilton, NY

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Open our eyes to see you and our ears, o Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.

Happy New Year! I'm so grateful to be here with you this morning and share with you, especially on this first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of another year of marking time based on the story of Jesus. Our annual journey through the story of Jesus in a church year is a journey of reminding ourselves of and discovering in new ways the good news of Jesus, the Creator-become-Creation, our All in All.

We begin this journey not with the events leading up to and including the birth of Jesus, but with stories of waiting. Advent is my favorite of the church seasons because it feels so near, so honest to tell stories about waiting. And, as we heard today, these are not calm stories of waiting. This is waiting in the dark.

In these stories, we people of God across time and space aren't waiting around in a chill kind of cosmic living room. We're not waiting in a well-appointed, bright, comfy space with house plants and a trickling Zen fountain from the clearance rack at Pier One. It's not like the opening scene of *The Good Place* where Eleanor sits on a comfy, mid-century revival couch looking at a mural on the wall that says, "Welcome! Everything is fine!"

No. As we read today, we're waiting in turmoil. We're waiting in chaos. We're waiting in times that make us desperate to be done waiting and to be at our promised resolution. We're waiting in days with a darkened sun, a moon that never gleams brightly enough to break through the dark of night. We're waiting in turbulent times, with nothing to sustain us, nothing to nourish us but our tears that, in their saltiness and bitterness, seem to only make us thirstier for the promised resolution.

"Restore us, O God! Remember, we are your people. We know you are a God of great might - awaken your might! Stir it up! Tear open the heavens! Do something! We believe you when you say that we were made for more than this, now please Lord bring us more than this. We're waiting. We're waiting so desperately."

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I'm sure that people all throughout time have felt this way, but the news is heavy and bad. And our tech centric, ultra-connected world being what it is, we are able to consume that heaviness at a rate and pace that I don't think we're built to handle.

Centuries of conflict in the Holy Land are once again boiling over and God is buried in rubble in Gaza and God is waiting for the return of a kidnapped loved one in Israel. In our own country and

other countries around the world, people are using that war as an excuse to enact acts of violent hatred against Jewish and Arab people around the world.

The war in Ukraine is officially a “genocide emergency” and we’re just a few weeks away from two years of the war in that country.

In October, the earthquakes in Afghanistan were deadlier than they would’ve been in another place with the same infrastructure for one simple reason: when the people – especially the women and children – of Afghanistan felt the first rumblings, they very logically and reasonably assumed they were being bombed again, so they sought shelter inside of structures not made to protect people from earthquakes. They ran inside wherever they could find – places where they’d be hidden from the eyes of unknown bombers – instead of seeking appropriate earthquake shelter.

There are twelve-year-old children in Syria who have never known life without war.

In Darfur, Sudan, less than a generation since genocide tore across the land, mass atrocities are again a current reality. And “mass atrocities” is just a way of saying an unthinkable number of people have experienced a, unthinkable level of violence and trauma. More than five million people have been forced to flee from their homes – many on routes on which they fled less than 20 years ago.

Closer to home, death from gun shots is astronomically higher in this country than any other country in the world with more than half of those deaths being people who are victims of suicide because life. is. hard.

I’m 37 and I feel young (most days), but I’m older than most of the elders of the trans community because our trans siblings – especially Black trans women – have life expectancies of around only 35 years as trans and anti-LGBTQ hate is on the rise, or maybe just as people feel more emboldened to act on their hate.

Every day, families (maybe even families in this room or online with us now) live with the stress of rising prices and stagnated pay rates, wondering how they’ll care for themselves and if anything will ever be easier or safer for their children.

Our neighbors and loved ones live with treatable and curable illnesses and injuries because they have to choose between healthcare and being able to afford food for their tables.

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“Restore us, O God! Remember, we are your people. We know you are a God of great might - awaken your might! Stir it up! Tear open the heavens! Do something!”

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These are the kinds of realities that I feel in these apocalyptic, revealing, desperate readings today. Fleming Routledge, a wonderful Episcopalian priest and preacher, says, “Every year, Advent begins in the dark... [it] begins with the recognition that human progress is a deception.” In other words, same song, two thousandth verse. The world is as it ever has been: dark.

On the first Sunday of Advent each year, we're called to name the darkness around us. To identify with the great poet-prophet Isaiah to take an honest look at \*all the things\* (gestures vaguely) and to honestly wrestle with all that is broken around and within us.

But we're also called to remind ourselves and affirm that this is not how it will always be and it is not the only way things are.

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Everything is not OK, but not everything is wrong, either. We see the signs of God's kin-dom when we have eyes to see through the dark

We certainly saw signs of God's kin-dom yesterday! I had thought I'd preach more about what we experienced at our Celebrate Dio CNY gathering with Bishop DeDe and Presiding Bishop Curry in Utica yesterday, but the truth is that I really don't yet have words for all the healing, beauty, hope, love, and joy that we saw. Truly, God was moving in and through and around and among and within all of us, making us more aware of God's mysterious presence that connects us always, but that sometimes we miss. (And if you weren't with us, give me a few days to get home to Michigan and rest up and then I'll get all the videos online so that you can experience it with us!)

We see the signs of God's kin-dom in our parishes, in this parish: in the relationships you all share as you recognize the truth of God that we are all connected, we are all one in our God who is Love. We see the signs of God's kin-dom in the work you do here in your community through your Good Neighbor grants, your financial support of your community aid organizations and agencies, your witness to the broad and inclusive love of God.

We see signs of the in-breaking of the kin-dom of God around us always when look through the dark.

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**"Restore us, O God! Remember, we are your people."**

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I'm sure you've all heard the proverb about the man walking along the shore where thousands of starfish had been washed up by high tide, throwing them back one at a time. Someone questions him – "You'll never rescue them all! What difference will it make?" And he replies as he throws another back, "I made a difference to that one!"

Although I get the point that that story is trying to make – and it's a good one - I really don't like it all that much, I think because it seems to erase the pain of the starfish who aren't thrown back. The children in the Holy Land living under storms of bombs, the victims of the October earthquakes who can't conceive of rebuilding their lives and communities, the families fleeing violence amid violence, some for the second time in only two decades, the people who see no hope beyond the barrel of a gun, the people who live in fear for simply being their full selves, the lonely, the worried, the hurting.

I don't mean to imply that because there are signs of God's kin-dom at work that hurt doesn't still hurt. That evil isn't still evil. That suffering isn't real. Just because things are going well in some places, doesn't mean that your pain doesn't count. It's real. It matters.

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**“Restore us, O God! Remember, we are your people.”**

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I’m going to cheat a bit here and go outside of our lectionary readings for the day (don’t tell the Bishop!) and remind you of another lesson we often read during this season of Advent. John the Baptist, Jesus’ wild prophet of a cousin, has been sitting in prison for speaking truth to power for a long time. He preached the coming of Jesus and the kin-dom of God and it had consequences for him – consequences that I’m sure he thought worth the risk for the sake of the Creator’s restoration of all things, but severe consequences nonetheless. He’s languishing in a dank, dark prison cell and he doesn’t hear news that the world is being radically upended and turned upside down by Jesus like he expected it to. He sends some of his disciples to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?” And Jesus’ reply is essentially, “Go tell John what you see! Look what’s happening. Healing! Good news is reaching the least among us!”

I identify with John the Baptist here. Jesus, this doesn’t look like we thought it would, it doesn’t look like you said it would. The world is dark. And when Jesus says “I’m doing the thing!” I want to say, “Yeah, but not for everyone!”

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**“Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another? Please, God restore us! Remember we are your people!”**

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I think one of the things I appreciate most about the liturgical calendar is that we don’t always have to be celebrating. Christmas – even without all the aggressively cheery and merry western trappings of the holiday and Mariah Carey – is a season of celebration. But we’re not in that season yet. We’re in Advent. And Advent gives us space to not be celebrating. It gives us space to name the dark around us. It gives us time to remember that we are living in wait for restoration from God.

Brian Zahnd, a pastor and author from Missouri, wrote: “Advent is for waiting. Yet most of us... are not very good at waiting. It feels too much like doing nothing... Or worse yet, waiting feels too much like lamenting, which is closer to the truth... The world has gone wrong, justice lies fallen in the streets, and it seems that God is nowhere to be found. That’s when the lamentation of waiting arises in our soul: ‘O Lord, how long?’ [But the prophets tell us] The Lord is coming, God is about to act, but for now...we wait.”

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I’ll say that waiting is hard when you’re in pain or you see hurt in the ones you love or in the world around you. And I think what’s hard about Jesus’s reply to “Go and tell John what you see” is that we see it both ways. We see the darkness and the light. The hurt and the relief. The sorrow and the joy. The ugliness and beauty.

This is the pain of being in between. We live in a time in between.

John asked Jesus who had come if he was the one who was to come. And Jesus's answer is yes! Jesus brings in the kin-dom of God into the world and age of strife and competing and waring powers and the kin-dom of God is here, but not yet fully.

We live in between when the old age still persists while the kin-dom of God is present, but not in its entirety. It's a transition time. And transition times are times of tension. The darkness and the light. The hurt and the relief. The sorrow and the joy. The ugliness and beauty.

And so we wait. We start our yearly journey through the story of Jesus with waiting. We wait in the darkness. We wait until we are no longer in between.

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**“Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another? Please, God restore us! Remember we are your people!”**

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The waiting is not pointless, though, friends.

Zahnd continues, “Waiting is essential. For it's in the waiting that our soul grows quiet and contemplative and cultivates a capacity for awareness by which we can discern what God is doing when [God] does act... Waiting for God to act only seemslike waiting for God to act. God is always acting because God is always loving the world and always giving birth to something.” **AND HEAR THIS PART FRIENDS: “Waiting for God to act is actually waiting for your soul to become quiet enough and contemplative enough to discern what God is doing in the obscure and forgotten corners, far from the corridors of power or wherever you think the action is.”**

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**“Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another? Please, God restore us! Remember we are your people!”**

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To that question that John passed on as a message from his prison cell, the question that the poets and prophets have shouted into the air throughout time, the question that you may whisper in grief, or the one that you may cry in lament, to that question – Jesus says, “Yes! I have come and I am the one who is to come.”

But also hear this also – Yes. You should wait. Not waiting for another to come and instantly set all to rights, but waiting for your own heart to perceive those signs of the kin-dom of God which is already here. Wait and look for the kin-dom of God and although it will not erase and reverse the pain of this world, it will help us as we live in between.

The waiting will help us to see the light steadily, quietly breaking through the darkness we name and feel.

The waiting will help us tune into to the way that the light is, almost imperceptibly, lifting the weight of the darkness from our eyes and shoulders and that place on our foreheads where our stress lives as the light grows steadily brighter and warmer and stronger within and around us.

The waiting will help us to sing defiantly with Mary the Mother of God in her prophetic song as she learned that she was to be in waiting for months and months to give birth to Jesus. Mary wasn't oblivious to the suffering around her when the angel came to her. She knew that everything in the dark world was not magically and instantly set right in the world around her, or even in her own life with the coming of Jesus. She wasn't imagining some life of luxury for herself – like “Ooooh! They gonna paint icons of me!”

She was exercising prophetic imagination of the time when there was no more in-between, dark-and-light, heavy-and-free, but only the age and kin-dom of God. She fiercely sang: “God has showed strength with his arm; and scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. Love has put down the mighty from their seat, and has exalted the humble and meek. Creator has filled the hungry with good things and the rich God has sent empty away.”

Mary had cultivated a capacity for awareness and was able to discern God at work, even as she waited for the different world she imagined to be fully realized.

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Friends, if this time in your life is one of joy, may you perceive in the sources of your joy the kin-dom of God at work in this world and join in that work with the one who has come and is to come. May you wait with your hope in a way that you are the light that draws others and this broken world out of the darkness.

And friends, if this time in your life is one of hurt, pain, sorrow, or confusion, may you also perceive through the brokenness the ways that God has come, and is coming, into this world. May you wait with hope in a way that you are the light that draws others and this broken world out of the darkness.

Amen.