

Prepared by Peace

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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November 27, 2022 - First Sunday of Advent

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;

the desert shall rejoice and blossom;

like the crocus 2 it shall blossom abundantly

and rejoice with joy and shouting.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,

the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,

the majesty of our God.

3

Strengthen the weak hands

and make firm the feeble knees.

4

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

“Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,

with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.”

5

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;

6

then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness

and streams in the desert;

7

the burning sand shall become a pool

and the thirsty ground springs of water;

the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp;

the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

8

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

9

No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.

10

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Matthew 24:36-44

36 'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Prayer

Sermon

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

Even Jesus, the gospel tells us, didn't know everything that was to come.

How often do we say it: we cannot know the day or the hour. That is the nature of the unexpected, the inbreaking of unexpected events, joy or catastrophe.

A colleague of mine has too much experience dealing with the unexpected. Three times in the last three years, on one day's notice, she's had to shut down a church building. All of us did that with CoVid, but the church she serves has also had to do it twice for structural emergencies. The third time was Tuesday of this past week, when a structural engineer was in the church on a routine inspection of their renovations and discovered the roof of the sanctuary was at risk of imminent collapse. Everyone out! A sibling church said come, join us next Sunday. In December they'll be in a town building. Shoring up has already begun.

Anna sent word to her people: a message of gratitude. A message of grace. A message of resilience.

She closed this way:

“We are putting safety first and trusting that God has a plan for this moment too. Somehow, this challenge - like all the others we face in life - will be used by God for goodness. God is good all the time! And what we know about ourselves after all we've been through these past few years, is that our church is incredibly strong and adaptive.”¹

That letter is amazing.

—

Every year we begin the season of Advent with a reading or two focused on something that we truly don't expect - though the season of Advent originally looked toward it: the coming (again) of Christ. So here we are, in a text that gets cherrypicked by left behind readers: Be prepared. Get ready. Stay awake. Don't get left behind.

¹ Rev Anna Flowers, <https://mailchi.mp/c8cb5dc6ff7a/important-update-church-building-closed-temporarily>

You could be forgiven for reading this as a prediction of disaster, of terrible things lingering just out of sight. This text sends me in that direction every time it comes up in the lectionary.

When I read it at the beginning of this three year cycle, I thought:

Stay alert - is there another pandemic? Insurrection? Will another country be invaded? How about the economy? Is there a family crisis coming? What is the next disaster?

A first reading leads immediately to urgency. This is a text that rings of hyper-vigilance - and I mean that in the sense of an emotional dysregulation related to anxiety. It is not good for us to be hyper-vigilant; to be always awake and watching, fearful. Yet Jesus seems to be asking us to be just that.

A careful reading, in context, might change our interpretation.

First, the text doesn't necessarily mean crisis or catastrophe - but most of us read it that way - especially now, with so many of us primed by crisis, and with that deeply embedded allusion to Left Behind on one side, and the idea of the thief in the night on the other. Yes, this is a text that points to sudden and disruptive change. But think about it - that sudden change would be a renewed presence of Christ in our midst.

Second, Jesus himself was not a catastrophic thinker. He somehow managed to avoid that heightened reactivity even as he faced betrayal, arrest and death. He wasn't perfectly calm - let's recall the tables flipping and his prayer in the garden - but he taught us a lot about how to walk through trauma and stress. He was close to God. He had friends. He had spiritual practices from Sabbath to prayer. The Prince of Peace was a good model of inner peace.

So, this text invites us to stay awake, be prepared, be ready for the unexpected. But the one making the invitation was full of a peace which surpasses all understanding.

Is there any way to do this without catastrophizing, without hypervigilance?

How do we prepare for Christmas - for welcoming the Christ Child and also walking through all the wonder and stress of the season?

Where do we turn to strengthen our hands and knees, as Isaiah promised?

What are the tools for inner peace that our faith might teach us this Advent season?

First, we are indeed people of faith who can hold all the complexity together.

Michelle Blake writes:

“One of the essential paradoxes of Advent: that while we wait for God, we are with God all along, that while we need to be reassured of God’s arrival, or the arrival of our homecoming, we are already at home. While we wait, we have to trust, to have faith, but it is God’s grace that gives us that faith. As with all spiritual knowledge, two things are true, and equally true, at once. The mind can’t grasp paradox; it is the knowledge of the soul.”²

And if this season is to bring us to that great knowledge of the soul - the assurance of Emmanuel, God is with us, we are blessed with spiritual practices to deepen that knowledge.

Jesus, our Emmanuel, reminds us that God is with us -
over and again, we tell our story,
the story of hope in dark times,
the story of peace which surpasses all understanding,
the story of a long awaited savior,
a tiny child,
God’s Love incarnate,
so real and present we can feel Christ.

So real and present we can feel Christ when we breathe deeply,
pausing to pray as he did,
to sit in the presence of God.

Lighting the candles, singing hymns ancient and new, setting the table,
we enter into ritual,
to embody the great story,
of the wonder of his love.

And we do all of it together,
whether we are in the same room or not,
together,
In community.
Christians are not independent practitioners.

² Michelle Blake, *The Tentmaker* - as quoted in <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/days-to-come-2022-advent-sermon-seeds-series/>

Joni Sancken says it this way: “This is the greatest treasure the church can offer in the aftermath of intense crises and trauma. God’s people are powerfully resilient. The God who has been with God’s people throughout history draws especially near and continues with us....numerous studies show that participation in worship has a buffering effect that nurtures resilience even as chronic trauma continues.”³

In the midst of a world filled with crisis, in church we create sacred moments and encircle the community with love. We bring Emmanuel, God with us, into our circle, singing to us: Comfort, comfort O my people - I speak peace to you.

Let me finish with a portion of Maya Angelou’s poem, *Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem*, in which a community finds peace at Christmas. I hope it inspires you this season:

AMAZING PEACE: A Christmas Poem

by Maya Angelou

...Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters,

Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope

And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.

The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,

Come the way of friendship.

It is the Glad Season.

Thunder ebbs to silence and lightning sleeps quietly in the corner.

³ Joni Sancken, *All Our Grievs to Bear: Responding with Resilience After Collective Trauma*. 2022. p .18 and p. 53.

...

As we make our way to higher ground.

Hope is born again in the faces of children

It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they walk into their sunsets.

Hope spreads around the earth. Brightening all things,

Even hate which crouches breeding in dark corridors.

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.

At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.

We listen carefully as it gathers strength.

We hear a sweetness.

The word is Peace.

...

We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.

We beckon this good season to wait a while with us.

...

We jubilate the precious advent of trust.

We shout with glorious tongues at the coming of hope.

...

Peace. We look at our world and speak the word aloud.

Peace. We look at each other, then into ourselves

And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation.

Peace, My Brother.

Peace, My Sister.

Peace, My Soul.

Peace to you, my siblings.

May peace be ours this Christmas.

Amen.