

First Sunday of Advent  
November 29, 2015  
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## **Becoming Agents of Hope**

Today marks a new season in the church and the beginning of our liturgical year. The colors on the altar and on our stoles have changed from green to blue to symbolize the sky in which there will be a star and as a sign of the journey that begins in darkness. Each week a candle is lit on the Advent wreath, anticipating Christ's eternal light. The liturgy is quieter, a bit more somber. These are signs that we are ushering in the season of Advent, a time of waiting, expectation and hope.

We need signs and symbols to remind us of what the advent of Christ really means. The weeks leading up to Christmas prepare our hearts to celebrate so much more than the birth of a baby. It is the incarnation of the divine into a suffering world, God's kingdom, come on earth. Stories of our ancestors recall how hope came to God's people in history, and how the promise is ours today. This sacred season offers us an opportunity to tell the accounts of God's redemptive work in the world, to envision the Christ who was, who is and who is to come.

On this First Sunday in Advent we do not hear the familiar stories that take us toward Bethlehem and tidings of comfort, but apocalyptic images and the prophecy of Christ's second coming. Today's gospel from Luke portrays a world torn apart by conflict, suffering, and fear. Even creation itself roars in agony. Jesus speaks of the signs of the end times, the destruction of the world, as we know it. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." These words of warning are meant to wake us up to what is truly at stake with the advent of Christ.

Luke wrote in a time when the Roman Empire earned its power through conquest. The destruction of Jerusalem and its second temple was a fresh and painful memory, and many in the Jewish community were estranged and exiled. The subversive message of Christ's coming in power and glory over and above the kingdom of Rome placed Christ followers in great peril. But Jesus' words to those who were oppressed were also an assurance of God's immeasurable love. "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." The return of the risen Christ would signify the end of a kingdom of violence and oppression and the beginning of a new age. The world would be transformed to God's intent, a kingdom of justice and peace.

Apocalyptic literature has often been written to encourage those who live on the margins of life. The images of Christ appearing in glory to work out God's purposes for peace provide hope and endurance for the suffering. But these visions of the future have also been used to engender fear and conformity, warning of the need to repent or be left behind. This text is not so much a prediction of when Christ will come again in judgment but words of wisdom on how we live in these times between Christ's birth and second coming.

This strange mixture of warning and comfort speaks to us profoundly today. While we may not personally feel oppressed or persecuted, apocalyptic images are as close as our television news. We have only to look to our neighbors who have lost so much of late, to understand that no one is immune to suffering. Fear drives us to secure our safety over the needs of those in distress. Fear can cause us to forget who we are, whose we are. The truth of our human

brokenness surrounds us, and we know more than ever that this world needs a savior. When these things take place, stand up and raise your heads, our redemption is near.

In 2012, when I was serving in Connecticut, the area was hard hit by Hurricane Sandy. Many in the surrounding community lost their homes and belongings. Still reeling from the damage of the storm, we half-heartedly entered into the season of Advent, counting our blessings that we were all safe. Then the news of the Newtown shootings came, where twenty innocent children and 6 adults, who were literally our neighbors, had been gunned down at an elementary school. Suddenly, nowhere felt safe. In the days following I remember feeling such dissonance between our broken hearts and this most wonderful time of the year. As we gathered at a vigil to pray and comfort one another, we stood together and raised up our heads. Christ walked with and among us as we organized resources for the families. Love incarnated is what Jesus came into the world to do, and love incarnated is what we are to do in response.

In his book, A Theology of Hope, Theologian Jurgen Moltmann, wrote of his time as a young German soldier in a prisoner of war camp. Horrified by the atrocities of war, Moltmann claims that Christ came to him in his days of captivity, and transformed his grieving heart, to a life of faith and service. He writes, "The Christian hope is no longer as such an opium of the beyond, but rather the divine power that makes us alive in this world." He speaks of a responsibility to live our Christian ethics in this time encouraging a profound awareness of what has been entrusted to God's people. Do we recognize the ways Christ comes to us now to transform us into agents of God's hope?

In this Advent season we choose our response to a world of suffering and impermanence. We may fearfully look for the signs of the end and gather in our own resources to feel safe. We may live in personal preoccupation contributing to collective apathy. Or we can watch, pray and envision what God intended for creation and participate in its transformation. Joining God in this redemptive work offers us hope for something new. In this time of reflection, preparation and expectation, may our hearts be transformed by the work of God in the world. Together let us raise our heads in hope, for in the Advent of Christ, our redemption is near. Amen.