

The First Sunday of Advent, November 29 2015. Luke 21:25-36 St. Augustine's Freeland  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton.

Since this is the first Sunday of Advent - the first day of the new Christian year - I say: "Happy New Year!" Today, we begin again. We begin again a story that –perhaps because of its continuing repetition – can become so familiar as to cease to be remarkable for us..

And the story begins quite unremarkably. It's about a refugee family; two individuals – one heavily pregnant – forced to re-locate briefly because of an Empire's whim for statistics. Brief exile leads to a birth in unsanitary conditions, amid farm animals.

Then the story begins to change, and with it, there comes a dawning realization that this is no ordinary peasant; that this person is quite unique in the annals of human history, with his remarkable parables, amazing acts of healing, and his way of living that re-framed what it means to be a human being.

There follows a sordid and ignominious death – a death, you might say, that represents not what we might hope for from each other as human beings, but what we have come to expect from each other.

And, finally – it would seem – beyond all hope there comes an event that transforms human existence forever.

And it all begins today, this sacred cycle that will take us through the grand story of the coming of a Savior, his life and death and life, and what it all means for us.

Advent is a season focused specifically on celebrating and strengthening hope. The days have grown shorter, and now, in darkness we learn to look for life, because we know that in nature's annual cycle of death the relentless emergence of new life is but a short wait hence. And here, in the cold time of the year can learn to appreciate the warmth of human caring and touch and its ultimate transcendence of our lives' circumstances.

The readings for this day – the First Sunday of the Year – invite a grand reflection – the vast panoply of human existence: what does it all mean? Where are we going?

You might wonder if the old joke answers: "Where are we all going, and why are we in this hand-basket?"!! The readings certainly want to suggest to us that even if the destination is proposed as joyful, the journey is decidedly dark and frightening. And recent human events seem to support that anxiety-provoking, fearful reality. It's hard to understand where we're headed, because where we're headed hasn't happened yet.

In the face of human and natural upheavals, in the potential for violent, meaningless death at evil peoples' hands, or the slow but now less certain death caused by our planet-killing behavior, it's easy to want to retreat into the past. Only the past is (we think, anyway!) secure, because it's already happened, it can't be changed. Oh! For those days when "Father knew best," when faith was a mile wide (though an inch deep), when things didn't change – or, at least, changed so slowly that we hardly noticed!

We think we can understand the past, because we have the luxury of being able to analyze it at our

leisure, with facts-certain available to us.

The tricky part about this is summed up by the great Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard, who observed that “Life can only be understood backwards; **but it must be lived forwards.**”

Anxiety, fear, and their unpleasant off-spring, anger, invite a retreat into those halcyon days (that never really existed), and in the same breath threaten our ability to engage fruitfully with the future’s encroaching dawn.

The future is emerging as I speak. I think we all know that.

Each of us has a preferred future – those hopes and dreams that sustain us. That preferred future is not only about what we hope for “out there” – in our every-day lives; it’s also about what we hope for “in here” – in our lives as people of faith and members of this faith community. I’m prepared to guarantee that each of our visions is slightly different.

Our faith calls us to go two steps further. We know the future is emerging all around us; we have some sort of awareness of what we’d prefer. As Christians, and members of this community, we’re called to explore what our shared future will look like. And (and this is a very important “and”) whatever that shared community might be like, it has to be seen through the lens of God’s future. Our touchstone for our journey together has to be in living into a vision of God’s future as we have encountered it in our sacred texts, in the stories of our forebears, and in our own, shared experience.

Sometimes – often – it’s hard to focus on the future when we have things in the past or present that are holding us back. Sometimes – often? – those weights come from the pain of living: The loss of a loved-one or a friend to death or relocation; conflict in personal relationships or the communities of our hearts; struggling with finances, or health, political challenges, violence – some or occasionally all of these things can weigh us down. We wrestle with life, with ourselves, with each other.

The story of Jacob wrestling with the angel at the ford – really wrestling with God – and overcoming, and wrenching a blessing in that struggle, though forever left with a limp – is a reminder that we can take the pain and make it bless us, but for it to bless us we have to let it go; we have to let go of those things that hold us captive in anxiety, or fear, or anger at ourselves or others. Don’t let your heart - our communal heart - be weighed down by the seeming arbitrariness and pain of living.

“Life can only be understood backwards; **but it must be lived forwards.**” What is our shared future? What is God’s hope for us in that future? Can we let go of the past, take what is valuable, leave the rest, and embrace our common journey into God’s future?

Now that’s a journey I’d like to make, and make it together. How about you?