

The First Sunday of Advent - Year A - The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland – 11.27.22

Advent IA: Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

There are so many advents today; it seems entirely appropriate to pay attention to these various arrivals on the busiest travel weekend of the year. After a warm October and stormy beginning to November, we are arriving at the beginning of winter—shorter days and longer, colder nights—with the promise of snow this week. The arrival of the new liturgical year - a year with the gospel of Matthew—begins today with the advent of Advent—as does the arrival of this time of our shared ministry.

Adventus is Latin for the Greek word Parousia which has to do with the final things, the final days when all of creation will finally experience the fullness of God's kingdom: the fullness of justice and of healing and of love—here in this outpost and beyond. So today, even as we stand at the beginning of so many things, we are given several visions or perspective on that moment when, finally, God's dream—as Bishop Desmond Tutu often described the kingdom—is fully realized.

The first Advent vision comes from the prophet Isaiah in 8th century BCE Judah. At the time, the kingdom of Assyria was the regional dominant superpower. But, the kingdom of Babylon was quickly gaining power, promising to usurp Assyria's most powerful kingdom status. It was a politically unstable world and the people of God were full of concern about what would become of them—What was their future? Their children's future? In the midst of shifting geopolitics, which might not be completely unfamiliar to us, there was real anxiety and deep despair.

Into that reality and those questions, Isaiah (whose very name means God Saves) speaks, painting an Advent vision of the days to come, where there would be no need for weapons of war because political polarization among people and kingdoms would be transformed. Instead, spears and swords and all weapons will be re-fashioned into tools to increase the harvest, so that all are fed. Many people from all walks of life will stream up the mountain to learn more about and practice the ways of God. (Whenever God speaks from a mountain, pay attention!) God as judge not only gets to set the vision, but also arbitrate that vision with a clear voice from the top of the mountain. In Isaiah, when fear, cynicism and despair are at their height, God speaks. A week and a half ago, classes at the high school in McMinnville were cancelled because shots were fired at the building. Club Q, Virginia—it is no wonder that Isaiah's Advent vision is so compelling.

The second Advent vision from Matthew's gospel is very different, but again there is a mountain involved, as Jesus speaks to his disciples from the Mount of Olives. So twice in one morning, we have come to a flashing stoplight that says, "If you don't pay attention to anything else, now is the time to listen up!"

And then Jesus paints a vision, not of the advent of the political kingdom of God, where all are eager to hear and implement God's ways of justice and peace, but rather a full-on advent in-breaking into normal everyday life. The Promised One comes in and enters wherever we are, whatever we are doing. Our households. If Isaiah's vision is what God's kingdom looks like from a political perspective, Matthew today gives us a more personal vision of what the in-

breaking of God looks like in the context of my life. Your life. Our lives. The Thanksgiving meals and festivities, the gatherings with family and friends, our work and our rest, our meal preparations and our sleep. All that goes on in our households, our economic world, are the locus of Jesus' "stay awake and be ready" Advent call. The disruption is full-bodied and far-reaching. Heads up: by the time we make our way through Matthew's gospel at the end of this liturgical year, there will not be one bit of life, one area of our commitments, that will remain unexamined or unchallenged. If that sounds or feels a little unsettling—then we've listened.

We are all too familiar with what disruption looks like. We've just lived through it! And are still making our way through it. My Thanksgiving dinner conversation with family included remembrances of all that has happened over the past three years—where we all have been, who we have lost, how we are taking some new risks now that we've been vaccinated and boosted several times. There were happy and sad moments, laughter and a few tears. Overall, more than a few times, we affirmed how glad we are that things are getting back to normal. This echoes a very common refrain of the past few months. Finally! We are getting back to normal! But even as I hear myself and others saying that, this gospel says, "Not so fast!"

Just as we begin to feel most strongly the inexorable pull towards a post-Thanksgiving meal nap. Just as our eyes are beginning to weigh down and we who dwell in the Northern Hemisphere feel the call, with all of nature, towards hibernation and a sleepier and quieter time, these words break in that it's time to wake up. We thought we were headed towards the advent of normalcy and right from the get-go on this first Sunday with the gospel of Matthew, that expectation—and, frankly, deep desire—gets upended and disrupted. It isn't a wake-up call to return to the normal of our pre-Covid rhythm, but rather an urgent call to remember how we have been changed by what we have seen and experienced of the in-breaking of God's love.

Jesus's startling Advent disruption urges us to go deeper in our remembering. Even as I remember the disruption of Covid, today Jesus says, "What else happened?" The remembering of that difficult and disrupted time, now almost three years ago in chronological time, takes a different turn. Things that had never caught my attention before suddenly came into vision: how a few families down the street started drawing pictures and leaving encouraging messages in chalk on the sidewalk to brighten up passersby's days: "You can do this!", "You're beautiful!", "You are not alone!" How the local library became the place to go to at 5pm most days—not inside, because it was closed, but outside—where sandwiches, carrots, chips and more were passed out, since the hot evening meal for the community's most vulnerable, served most nights for years at the Episcopal Church in town, had to close down. How a house a couple of blocks over put signs in the window that said, "Being deeply loved gives you strength," and "Loving deeply gives you courage." Advent messages. Advent actions. The alertness and wakefulness of what really matters and who we might reach out to and how we might we share came to the forefront. In a way, it was as if we had lived most of our lives in Ordinary Time and suddenly the entire world was living and experiencing Advent. It was not an anticipated or hoped for advent, but it was an urgent, practical advent.

That is the Advent disruption that Matthew's Jesus is calling us back to this morning. It is as if Jesus, who in this part of Matthew's gospel is on the verge of being crucified, is saying,

“Remember those times when you have been most alert and awake to the healing power of love—those times when your world cracked open and changed and you saw the world most clearly with my eyes and my heart. That is actually what is most normal! That is what I want you to open your eyes to and stay ready for: the in-breaking of that love into the ordinary and every day.” It might seem like it doesn’t happen very often, but Jesus implies here that it does. All the time. It’s just a matter of opening our eyes and focusing on the right things.

In our work and ministry together, today and in the years ahead, we need both Advent visions. We need Isaiah’s big, seemingly-impossible, far-reaching, long-range, all-inclusive justice and peace vision. We also need Matthew’s personally-challenging, intimate, day-to-day, work-and-home, relational, how-do-you see-God-in-this person-in-this-moment-in-this-day vision. And, because living into these visions requires courage, we also need one another. We need all of us who are here. We need all of those who are not here. We need all of the saints of the past and all of the justice-seekers of the present. We need those we agree with and those we don’t agree with. At the beginning of this Advent, if any are wondering how this happens, today’s Collect gives some guidance: with grace and in grace, surrounded by grace and extending grace, we will prod one another to stay awake as we watch and wait and celebrate and offer ourselves for the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. Amen.