

First Sunday of Advent, 27 November 2022
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Gresham OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Supply Priest

Welcome to Advent! As we approach the darkest day of the year, church tradition has us focus on light, focus on newness: a new church year, a new birth, new opportunities, new hope. So we began by lighting the first Advent candle to symbolize the growing light that we are not seeing yet but know is coming, and then praying that we might put on the armor of light. The world is very dark and the darkness worries and oppresses us – so we pray for the ‘armor of light’, both for our own protection from the darkness of evil and to be ourselves bringers of light for the benefit of others.

Advent is a season of hope, always most needed in times of turmoil like our own, with the repeated manifestations of hostility and violence all around us, as well as shocking natural disasters. We will find images and descriptions throughout the Advent readings that acknowledge darkness and pain, conflict and fear, while at the same time overflowing with hope. This is particularly true of the readings from Hebrew Scripture which this year are all from Isaiah's beautiful prophecies.

Today's Isaiah passage is particularly apt as it promises that the Lord's wisdom will spread and enable everyone to “beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; as nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” It is such a gift to be reminded of that promise and possibility of a world without war. In order to have the fortitude to continue in our prayers and efforts to alleviate the suffering here at home and all around the world, caused by war and enmity, and to encourage efforts to end violent conflicts everywhere, we need to remember this promise that it is possible to put an end to war, that violent conflict is not the inevitable and permanent condition of humanity.

Today's anticipation is of Jesus coming as bringer of light and peace. Throughout Advent the days grow shorter and the darkness increases around us, while at the same time the light grows in our worship and in our homes with more candles each week. The growing light reminds us of the hope that is in our hearts, so that we too can be light bearers.

Our Psalm today is a favorite of mine, particularly that lovely opening line, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’” When I was just 10 years old, while we were on vacation my adventurous little brother decided to climb a trellis where he impaled both hands on rusty nails. Our parents rushed him to the emergency room and I was left in the care of a kind elderly woman at our motel. She was an accomplished artisan who shared her supplies with me. In particular she gave me a little plaster plaque she had made with those words from the psalm above an old New England style church. She encouraged me to color it any way I liked – which I did – and that plaque hung above my desk for years. It has always felt like one of the earliest manifestations of my call to the priesthood, completely unrecognized at the time. Like most calls from God, it was at once a comfort and a challenge. Whenever I encounter those words, I am reminded that God was always calling me even though I did not fully understand the call for many years, and even though the priesthood was not open to women for another two decades. That was a very specific call, but we are all called. God invites all of us into relationship, into peace, into being light bearers joining in what is called in Hebrew, *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world.

The short Epistle reading gives us the image of light as armor. So, as we keep lighting more candles, bringing more light into the church and into our lives, we are bringing in protection from the darkness and evil around us. Sometimes the chaos and evil threaten to overwhelm us so that it is good to have the reminder that the light and good flowing from the Love which is God are far stronger, offering us a safe haven amid the storms of evil.

Then in the Gospel reading we were admonished once again not to assume that we know what is about to happen. In the same situation, ‘one is taken and the other is left’. We really do not ever know what is going to happen when – which is not a comforting thought for those of us who always want to know what's next. Last week, Jesus reminded us not to look for ‘signs’ assuming we

could know exactly what they might mean, especially about God's actions; this week we are reminded that the same situation can have completely different outcomes for two people whose circumstances are otherwise identical. So does this mean we should panic, or just give up and hide? Jesus says that it means that we should always be prepared. We should not assume that there will be a particular sign to let us know when disaster will strike or when something wonderful will happen. We should always be ready for anything. This is not easy advice to live up to, but it is comforting in the context of the promise that we will never face anything alone. I am reminded of the 'read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest' collect from two weeks ago with its challenge to immerse ourselves in scripture so that we will never be without God, never let go of God's outstretched hand. Being ready means accepting the hand stretched out to us, the embrace in the midst of the storm.

Throughout this Advent our worship will echo with the 'Great O Antiphons', which originally served as primary texts for daily worship during the Octave (8 days) before Christmas and have since spread throughout Advent. In the original texts, we call upon Christ by many of the titles given him in Hebrew Scripture. In order they are 'Wisdom of God, Lord and ruler of Israel, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring, Desire of nations, Emmanuel (Hebrew for 'God with us'), and Savior of the Nations'. Each antiphon has a title for Christ and a request, as we urgently call for the savior to be born into the midst of our dark world. These O antiphons have been composed into a hymn that we are all familiar with, the soundtrack of Advent for a lot of us. Our Prayers of the People during this season use Christ's titles from the O Antiphons, and each service will conclude with some of the verses of the hymn 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel', varying from week to week as appropriate to the readings.

So throughout Advent, we will light candles and immerse ourselves in the prophecy and promises, but we will also put our energy into calling on Christ to come. Advent is not only passive waiting and hoping; it is also remembering the actions and promises of God and calling God into our hearts and lives and world to bring light and peace, healing and comfort, wisdom and order, hope and love to everyone, and to make us healers and bearers of light in the darkness.

I will conclude with encouraging words from one of the Advent handouts. It is called an Advent Credo, based in scripture and adapted by various authors over recent years:

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—This is true: 'For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.'

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—This is true: 'I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.'

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—This is true: 'Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.'

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—This is true: 'To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.'

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers. This is true: 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.'

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history — This is true: 'The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.'

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world. Amen.