

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
I Advent, Dec 1, 2024  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren  
Texts: Zechariah 14:4-9  
I Thessalonians 3:9-13  
Luke 21: 25-31  
Theme: Discovering God in the Ordinary.

Advent has arrived and if you are anything like me it has probably caught you off-guard. Even though Advent is one of my most favorite times of year, I often feel a bit off balance as it begins. I abhor Black Friday as the Major Feast Day of American consumerism knowing that it is one of the major stories that people actually live by: I am what I purchase, I am what I have. When in fact it is very easy for the story to become, I am owned by what I claim to own. I celebrated by sleeping in, making leftover turkey and cranberry sliders and working in the yard shoveling horse manure into my asparagus beds. But even in my disgust about Black Friday, I find myself worrying about getting started on my own Christmas shopping as if most of the people in my life actually need more stuff. It's embarrassing, how seductive our culture of acquisition actually is for each of us. I know that people really need more relationship and want more connection. We all know deep in our bones that people are desperately lonely even our children trapped in an endless cycle of media dopamine hits without real relationship. Each of us desire more understanding and hunger for more compassion in their lives but I'm still tempted to let stuff "stand-in" for what people really hope for and what is more costly for me to give. I suppose being off balance or out of step is perhaps an apt way to understand the beginning of Advent. We are not always tuned-in or ready for God, but that will not prevent God's coming to us in this time here and now nor at the end of time.

*Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

Advent is a wake-up call of sorts that we can count on every year. It is the grace of the Christian calendar saying "Hey pay attention, be alert, keep awake! A friend of mine told me that his newish car gave him an Advent message this week, "Your free trial of auto pilot is expired." Wake up! Be Alert! Keep your hands on the wheel, your eyes on the road. The world is alive with hope for God's return, are you ready?"

Advent of course is meant as a period of preparation for our joyful celebration of the mystery of God in the Holy Child, Jesus. It is meant as a time of preparation not only for the coming of Jesus at Bethlehem but also at the end of time when Christ will come in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead. Advent is not only preparation for the joy of Christmas but also preparation in a deeper sense to meet the God of the universe who will judge not only our deeds but our inner lives with the grace of his refining love. Advent is thus intended as a time to take stock of our lives, to become attentive to the movement of God in our lives anew. I think it was Socrates that said “The unexamined life ain’t worth livin,” to say it with a Texan twist.

The collect for the day reminds us of this when it says,

“Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to life immortal.”

“Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light?” Well we could sure use some armor of light in this moment. Let’s hear it for the charge of the light brigade. But it also seems that having the armor of light is connected to coming to grips with our own darkness first. What do works of darkness have to do with my everyday ordinary life? The answer is like the spiritual journey itself, humbling. Our lives are not uniformly filled with light. They are dappled with it. All of us, whether we want to admit to it or not, have places of deep shadow within us. I’m guessing you can name some of the shadow side in your own, I mean other people’s lives. My own besetting shadows are many: a surprising reservoir of anger, resentments that are hard to let go of, impatience with... well let’s just leave it open, uncharitable thoughts, lust, greed, anxiety, fear.. the list might go on but I’ve already outed myself as a human being in the pulpit. All of us, in our moments of brutal honesty, can see that we possess or at times are possessed by our inner shadows. We all have works of darkness that we need desperately to cast away if we want to become more-full of light.

Coming to grips with the reality of our darkness is something we all must do if we are to grow into the likeness of Christ, to be changed into the fully alive human beings God desires us to become. I had to laugh the other day listening to an interview with Nadia Bolz-Weber who pointed out how ridiculous it is when we won’t admit to our failings and ask for forgiveness from other as if people can’t

already see our darkness and that by not admitting to it that they somehow remain hidden. It does not mean that we are all darkness. Quite to the contrary we have been fearfully and wonderfully made says the psalmist. (Psalm 137) In fact we have places of wonderful light in our lives, patches of brilliance and glory. We are a mixture of light and dark, a dappled pattern of brilliance and gloom like the light filtering through a dense canopy of trees. We are not two separate beings, one wonderfully full of light and the other hopelessly dark and lost. Mysteriously our light and dark aspects are one. And it is important to understand this, to understand that our wholeness as children of God, depends upon bringing that whole person both light and darkness into the healing presence of God. When we dare to do this, wonderful things can begin to happen. Reconciliation we thought out of reach can come near. Temptations we could never seem to master can lose their allure. Change, even deep change we did not think possible can begin in our lives. Creativity can burst forth in unexpected dimensions. We can discover the wonder of God's work in us, that God can use both our light and our darkness through the power of His transforming love.

This brings to mind for me one of my favorite quotes about the Christian life and Advent by a writer named John Heagle.

In an age which offers a variety of escapes from the human condition, Christians are more than ever a sign of contradiction. They continue to believe that the search for God must begin with the acceptance of the human. They believe this because it is in the stable of humanity that God has come in search of us.

In the human experience of Jesus, God became available to us as the depth of human life. Thus, a Christian believes that the experience of ultimate meaning comes not from a leap out of the human condition, but a journey through its dark waters.

All of this is a way of saying that the Christian life and the struggles that it entails are found in the midst of our daily life. For this very reason worship, prayer and praise are not optional activities for those who want to know God at a depth. They are practices we involve ourselves in not just when we feel like it but as constant companions on the way. The quest for God's ongoing grace is present in the task I am doing now, in the person I am with now, in the joy of celebrating the relationships I treasure now, in the pain of the loss of a beloved friend or partner I am feeling now, in the question I am trying to understand now, the beauty I am experiencing now – all of these can become the place in which the spiritual is

found, each can become the meeting place of God's ever-present grace. Advent is meant to remind us of this.

This is what the mystery of the Incarnation means, that Christ comes to us in the seemingly ordinary fabric of today's events and tasks. As Jesus said, if you want to discover God at work you don't need to look too far, consider the fig tree that is right in front of you. There are clues to the kingdom of God in every nook and cranny of the earth but most of us are not looking for them. By saying hey look at this fig tree, Jesus was saying look for the signs of new life around you and you will find me there at work. You don't have to look too hard. You don't need to focus on earthquakes or hurricanes to see me. I'm at work almost everywhere, in the class you hate at school, in the Thanksgiving meal at La Mesa, in the legal team discovering new evidence that frees a death row inmate from prison, in a youth program in the south valley, in a co-worker's troubles, and cavorting on the Montessori playground. If you have eyes to see it, I'm at work in the most ordinary of events in your life. You can discover God at work right before your eyes.

Many faithful people have expressed this insight across the ages. St. Paul could preach Christ to a crowd using the monument to an unknown God in Greece. Brother Lawrence found God while joyfully washing pots and pans in the kitchen. St. Francis saw in the diseased and deformed eyes of lepers the face of Christ. C.S. Lewis got on a bus in London headed for the Zoo and in the course of an ordinary bus ride experienced the presence of God's Holy Spirit that led to his conversion. The everyday is not just everyday, the mundane is anything but mundane it is the stuff of God's creation. As Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote, "The world is charged with the glory of God." Christ comes to us in the most unexpected of ways. Christ plays in 10,000 places.

I love the language of our reading today from I Thessalonians, the prayerful hope that Paul expresses of this beloved community of believers.

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

We would do well to linger on this line, to dwell on the power of its message to us. How can we as a community "increase and abound in love for one another?" How can we allow God to work his miracle of growth and increase in our lives, here and now in the everyday? I believe this Advent holds out a promise to all of us. That if we will bring God the stuff of our lives the light and the darkness, if we will dare to embrace the dark waters of our human condition, God will meet us there in the

stable of our humanity. God will touch us with his abounding grace that we might as a community “increase and abound in love fore one another and for all.” God desires this community to be one of abounding love in the everyday, a place of sharing one another’s burdens, a community of care and compassion for its members and those who are not yet members. God desires that we make our love for children and youth visible in tangible and meaningful ways. God wants this to be a place people are attracted to because they see how we love each other. By God’s grace we can continue to become that kind of community more and more. We can live in the everyday with each other and discover the presence of Christ in our midst.

If we will dare to live in the now of God’s grace, to see Christ in the present event or task, we will find that we will be found ready at “the last.” When the “last day” comes for each of us and we encounter the glorious majesty of God we will discover something wonderful. Yes, will be judged at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all of his saints, and the measure of what we have become will be known. But we need not fear, for this majesty will have a face, a face of great compassion and great humility, the face of Christ, whom we will have met over and over again in the mundane and “seemingly ordinary” encounters of life. This is grace, that God in Christ has come near to us, making the everyday a place of encounter with a God who desires that we might increase and abound in love for one another and for all. May it be so among us. May Advent be the coming of love’s increase among us, here and now in our very midst. May you find God in the ordinary. May it be well with your soul.