

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

A: Advent 1

Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

27 November 2022

Salem, Bridgeport

“Commissioned as Candles of Hope”

Today is the Fourth Sunday before Christmas, which means it is the first day of the New Year in the Church. And while the world is telling us to get ready for secular celebrations with family and friends (most of which will not even mention Christ), and while congregations are getting ready to celebrate the birth of baby Jesus, Advent begins with a very different message.

The Latin word *adventus* [*ahd vahn toos*] was the translation of the Greek *parousia* [*paa roo see uh*]— a word used for both the 1st Coming of Christ in the human flesh as baby Jesus & his 2nd Coming at the end of time. Advent, then, always tended to focus on both, with the focus of the first 2 weeks on the Second Coming, and the focus of the last 2 weeks on the First. Together, the dual foci remind us that we live in the time between, which is exactly what Jesus is pointing out in our gospel for today.

Now the interesting thing in our gospel is that Jesus is saying something new to those familiar with the story of Noah. According to the story in Genesis 6,

⁵*The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.*

⁶*The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.*

⁷*So the Lord said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created — and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground — for I regret that I have made them....”*

¹³*So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth.”*

In other words, it is because of people’s sin and wickedness that God is going to destroy them.

But here Jesus says nothing about sin or wickedness; instead he says, “*For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage... and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away....*”

In other words, Jesus points out that all those people in Noah’s time who were simply engaged in the ordinariness of everyday living, missed out on God’s saving action; only Noah and his family were saved.

And Jesus goes on to say that two people can be doing the exact same thing — working in the field, grinding meal, worshipping in church, feeding the hungry — & one will be saved & one will not.

In other words, it’s not about *what* the people are *doing* — it’s about living like Noah instead of like everyone else in the world;

Now before I go on to talk about how Noah lived differently, let me emphasize something here:

To me this is not about whether we go to heaven or hell someday; it’s about how we live our lives here on earth. Jesus’ call to us is to live like Noah — right here, right now.

And what that means is that it’s not about the outer things of our lives — it’s not about whether we attend worship or not, or whether we watch online or not, it’s not about how much we give to the church, it’s not about how much time we spend in committee meetings, it’s not about how many good deeds we do to help our neighbors, it’s not about developing mission statements or strategic plans.

It’s not about any of those things, because we can do every single one of those things and not be living like Noah.

Because to live like Noah means that we have to be close enough to God to hear what God is saying and we have to trust God enough to do what God says, no matter what it is, even if it means building an ark in the middle of a desert and becoming the laughing stock of the entire village.

One of the principles we learned in Forward Leadership is that
in order for white mainline congregations they need adaptive change,
and yet all that most congregations are willing try are technical changes.

Technical changes are the things that we do –

trying new worship services, new mission projects, new stewardship campaigns, new evangelism approaches –
but none of those things end up making a difference long term.

They might work in other organizations, but they don't work in the church,
because God's primary concern in the church is not about what we do, but who we are.
God's only real concern is you and your relationship with God.

That's what the apostle Paul is saying in our second reading from Romans
when he says, "*it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep...
lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*"

That's what Jesus is saying when he urges us to "*keep awake*" –
to pay attention to what God is doing inside us and around us and through us.

It's what the prophet Isaiah is saying in our first reading when he invites us to
"*come, let us walk in the light of God*".

Today as we begin a new year, we are called to wake from sleep,
to wake from the ordinariness of our everyday lives, and to keep awake to what God is up to,
so that we might put on the armor of light and walk in God's light.

Yesterday I saw an interesting quote by the poet, Rumi:

"Being a candle is not easy; in order to give light one must first burn."

Earlier in this service we lit a candle on our Advent wreath.

Our readings call us to put on the armor of light;
in other words, to be like candles shining in the darkness.

We are all candles, but we cannot light ourselves – only God can ignite the flame.

But once that flame is ignited, then our light will shine in the darkness,
will light the way, and will draw others into the light.

Let me suggest an Advent challenge for each of us.

Let's each offer to God to be a candle,
just like the candle on our Advent wreath each week.

So this week, let's offer ourselves to be candles of hope to everyone around us.

And as we do that, let me offer you 3 scriptures on Hope.

"...those who hope in God will not be disappointed". [Isaiah 49:23b]

*"For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future." [Jeremiah 29:11]*

and finally,

*"glory even in your suffering because ...suffering produces perseverance;
4perseverance, character; ... character, hope. 5And hope will not disappoint us,
because God's love has been poured out into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. [Romans 5:3b-5]*

Today before I send you out as candles of hope into a world of despair,

I ask that you present yourselves right now, as we ask God to set us on fire.

Will you pray with me?

God of Light, arise like the sun at dawn and wake up our sleeping spirits.

Wake us up from the darkness of night and from everything that has caused us to despair.

Shine on us, O Sun of Righteousness, with healing in your wings!

Enlighten our minds, set our hearts on fire, and set our spirits ablaze,
that we might love you more than anything else in the world.

Light up our lives from the inside so that our armor of light will be set aglow

and everyone who encounters us will see your light and feel your warmth radiating from us.

In this first week of Advent, God, let us burn with the fire of hope.

We pray this in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Spirit. **Amen**