

Awake and Waiting

Advent is usually a difficult season to hold on to. Before the leaves even begin to turn their bright fall colors, the stores begin hauling out the Christmas decorations. Before thanksgiving, the radio stations and malls begin blasting Christmas songs and everywhere, we are told to have a “Merry Christmas!”

And the church, as it often is, is just a little out of step with the rest of the world. “Wait a minute, we say. Not so fast”

Advent asks us to wait. And as our study, “God with Us” from ELCA Hunger points out, many of us feel like we have been waiting. A long time. I remember driving home that day in March prepared to wait out the pandemic. I thought it would be a few weeks. Then a few months. Now I wonder when will the wait be over?

And some people are like “I’m not waiting for Christmas; I’m dragging out the Christmas tree and putting on the Christmas music right now” And that’s okay. The waiting of Advent isn’t really about music or decorations.

Our lesson for Isaiah is not merry. It is a lament. It is a lament from a community that sees that everything has gone wrong for them. This part

of Isaiah was written after Israel had been defeated and taken into captivity. They had lost their nation, their homeland, and their status.

And they wondered, where is God? What is God doing? If only God would do something dramatic to show not only their enemies that he is still here, but to reassure his own people that he still cares

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence —
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil —
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

Oh God, if only you would come down and do something dramatic and put things right again.

I find this text from Isaiah to be very relevant this Advent especially. Oh God that you would rend the heavens and come down and put things right!

We desperately need Christmas so desperately and it has nothing to do with presents, cookies or chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” Oh that you would come and be with us again, God’s people in exile lamented. They began to remember what they had lost and as we tend to do, they romanticized the past ...

“When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.” They remembered the dramatic events of the Exodus, when God led them out of the red sea and Moses climbed up the mountain which quaked and burned as God gave Moses the law. They remembered the good times. But they also remembered how little they appreciated the good times.

But even with all the dramatic revelations, the people rebelled and lost faith.

We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

“We all fade like a leaf and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”
... what kind of a holiday saying is that? What kind of saying is that? It is a true one. And at some level, we all know that truth. We know that without God it is all a sham, a waste, meaningless. It like a ball with cheap gold paint that begins to chip off as soon as we get it home. Advent reminds us that what we long for is for the world to be put right – to be reconciled to God.

In our Gospel Jesus says to “Keep awake.” And again, it may be that some of us feel like we have been kept awake too late too many nights as sleep evades us.

But Jesus isn’t telling us to stay awake with worry. He’s calling on us to keep awake in Hope. Because Advent is about hope. This is a great quote from the study:

To “keep awake” is to grasp the kind of hope that inspires and to renounce the kind of hope that incapacitates. It is to feed on the hope that propels and to starve the hope that paralyzes. It is the gospel hope that tells us not to “wait and see” but to “come and see.”

God is with us. God has always been with us. People of faith are never promised that we will be exempt from troubles and hardship but that we will be sustained by God in times of troubles and hardships. God is with us, sustaining us with hope. That hope is that God is with us and God is working to redeem the world. The world will be put right. We can believe and trust that. We have a hope that reassures us so that we don’t need to stay awake at night with anxiety but can sleep in the confidence of a God who is going to make the world right. We can keep awake in hope and rest in hope and work in hope and love in hope. Because God is with us. Amen

Let us pray this prayer from the Study God with Us:

Gracious God, you sustain your people through seasons of change and challenge. Breathe into us your Spirit, drive us from our waiting places and into the world to be part of the promise you proclaim. Inspire us with hope and courage to confront our needs — for justice, for health, for liberation, for one another and for you — and restore our relationships with one another and with all of creation. In the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen