

The First Sunday in Advent + December 2, 2018

In keeping with Daylight Savings Time, once a year we “fall back” and once a year we “spring ahead.” About a month ago we fell back by turning the clocks back one hour. Come spring we’ll spring ahead by turning the clocks ahead one hour.

Of these two, which to you prefer? Falling back or springing ahead? I am rather fond of the “falling back” time. It means I get an extra hour of sleep.

Living in God’s time, I sometimes think that we Christian folks prefer falling back. We live between memory and hope. We live between Christ’s coming among us once and in the promise that Christ will come again. The Bible is both story and promise. We lean on the story of God’s love that has come to us in Jesus and we lean on the promise that Christ is with us still and is yet to come, but I think we tend to lean more into the story of Jesus’ first coming among us more than the promise of Jesus coming again. Yet, here we are on the First Sunday in Advent, setting our clocks ahead and peering into the future.

And what are we to make of it?

Contrary to popular opinion and practice, Advent is not a countdown to Christmas. Advent hope is marked by a yearning and longing for the fullness of God’s Kingdom. When we gather in darkness we ask God to woo us with God’s light. We hold to *both* the story and the promise, but sometimes the promise of what will be eludes us or confuses us or confounds us.

We don’t always know what to do with it.

Do we turn the promise into a prediction? In the last century many have dealt with the promise of Christ’s final coming as something like a weather forecast of when it will be and what it even might be like. This comes from attempts at taking the bible literally.

Do we treat the promise with fear and trembling? The fear is that if Jesus comes again to judge the world then I guess I better behave or else I will be punished. I once saw a T-Shirt that summed this interpretation up well: “Jesus is coming. Look busy!”

Or, do we blithely ignore it? Some have opted to do so with very well-reasoned and sophisticated justification. It’s a neat theological trick to focus only the things we like and ignore those things that make us too uncomfortable.

What do we do with it all?

The invitation in Advent is to embrace it because it *has everything to do with how we live in the present faithfully and without fear.*

In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke eloquently of the promise of what is yet to come. He speaks of former slaves and former slave-owners joined together, of white children and black children holding hands and like most of his speeches and sermons, the dream Dr. King expresses is really God’s dream. So, in his most famous speech he invokes the prophet Isaiah: “Every valley will be exalted and every hill and mountain made low, the rough places made plain, the crooked places made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together. This is our hope.”

Do you see? The vision of God’s promised future of a renewed and reconciled creation gave Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference the energy to labor for justice in the here and now – allowing the promise of the future to direct the way we live in the present.

God calls us to be restless ... to be so hooked on God’s dream that it makes us praying for and pining to make it happen now.

When Jesus speaks about the last things in today’s Gospel lesson, he speaks of a day when the “Son of Man will come in great power and glory.” It is a day when God will do a new thing once and for all.

Jesus is pretty clear that that day has not yet come in its fullness. There will be distress among the nations and on the planet. But this suffering will not last and the arrogant rule of the powerful will be destroyed. And what are the faithful to do in the midst of it all?

“Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Be alert. Look for the signs of God’s redemptive work for the last things are not to be feared but to be welcomed because God will be ushering in a brand new day. And already, now, we get to see glimmers of that future hope, to see where God is making all things new, to see where the promise is unfolding now.

Sometimes that isn’t a very easy thing to do, especially if when we hear about recent report on climate change (it’s pretty grim), or the clamoring of violence in Yemen or Afghanistan, famine in the Sudan, another mass shooting, or getting bad news from your doctor or oncologist.

In the face of so much suffering, we must lament, cry out and grieve, but we need not dwell there not wallow in despair.

See where God’s transforming love is taking place. Know that the suffering of the present age will not last forever and look to the hope of a day to come. Let that direct your living and being.

Fasten your hearts to the vision of nations beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and allow that vision to fuel energy for making peace.

Cling to the vision of that day when all the world will be gathered at the Mountain of God for a grand feast of rich food and fine wine and let that vision empower you to feed your hungry neighbor.

Wallow in the vision of that day when there will be no more weeping and God will wipe away all tears. Let that direct your deeds of compassion to your suffering neighbor.

Trusts in the hope of Jesus, the Lamb, sitting on the eternal throne and with that vision have courage to call out the lies of the arrogant powers and principalities.

We are called to be people of resilient hope. Such is the serious business of Advent.

Some years ago, I did CPE. CPE is short for Clinical Pastoral Education, a seminary requirement of spending three months in chaplaincy setting. My CPE experience took place at a hospital and one experience from that three months stands out. It was the time I met Thelma. Thelma was suffering from severe diabetes. Some years earlier, her illness caused her to be blind. A devout Baptist, Thelma spoke freely of her faith and was so very engaging. She said, "Chaplain, you probably think I can't see, but let me tell you that I can see things that a lot of folks who see can't see. Then she quoted, by memory, several passages from scripture about the day when the blind will see, the deaf will hear and the lame will leap for joy or that day when the Lamb will sit on the eternal throne. She loved to imagine and talk about that longed for day, and then she told me that her job, in the meantime, was to let everyone know about her God, this God.

"Stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near."

We live between memory and hope. Cling to the story of Jesus who came and died and is risen among us now *and* cling to the promise of his coming again. We don't know completely what or when or how the future will unfold but the good news is that we know who holds it. Amen.