

We are in Advent, the beginning of a new church year. To some of you newer members and guests of our church, Advent may seem absurd, a bit ridiculous when the world outside of these doors is preparing and celebrating the holidays, and we in this world inside the doors of this church are telling you to step out of that secular schedule and quiet yourself, prepare yourself, live in hope and peace. We change things in our worship for Advent to help as you step into this church season: the glittering metal of the chalices and altar dishes change to transparent glass as we look thru them, in true advent fashion, to what is yet to come. The advent wreath is present, symbolizing that God has no beginning and no end and that Christ brings light to our darkened world (did you notice the candle light grows as we near his birth?) Then there's the color change. . . Royal Blue is the color of royalty to welcome the coming of a King. It can also symbolize the night sky: the sky which grows darker and darker, where we begin to long for light again. The sky in which the star appeared to announce the birth of Jesus. While purple has traditionally been the liturgical color for Advent, Royal Blue is used in most Episcopal church to distinguish it from Lent. Lent is the penitential time, advent is the time for waiting and expectation and longing for the light to come into our world. We use real flat bread for communion as a way to wake up our senses and realize that something is stirring, something is different and yet at the same time we get to know Christ in the breaking of bread as he asked us to. That's some of the absurdity of advent....we recall two things at once, we live in two time zones at once....the birth of divinity made human and the 2nd coming of Christ at a time we know not when or how.

There's another way we live in two time zones at once: as the world outside celebrates Christmas and the holiday may be over for some by noon on Dec 25, that's when we're just really getting into it all. Here's a warning: we don't celebrate Christmas until Christmas eve and we honor the 12 days of Christmas right up to the feast of the Epiphany on Jan 6 where we read scripture to tell us about the arrival of the magi, the three kings, the wise men, however you call them. Have you noticed that they are on the journey? Our manger scene, our crèche, is set up in front of the main altar and the caravan of magi are found on the top of the overhang near where the bell choir is located. Watch them. Journey with them. They will travel closer and closer to Bethlehem, to the manger, closer and closer to the holy altar, perhaps symbolic of our own journeys to Christ.

So if you think Advent is strange and absurd, it sure is. Today we light the peace candle and we pray about a beautiful, peaceful world of wholeness and harmony. That's very nice, but I think we're still waiting for that peace. We wait for things to be made right. We wait for hope. As St. Paul said, in accordance with God's promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness, justice, decency, is at home. And in today's good news, the gospel, we listen to a crazy man out in the desert who says salvation is coming and you'd better be prepared. And we, like the church living in two time zones at once, come to worship, hear about peace and salvation in one of our worlds and then we will get into our cars, drive back, acting almost crazy ourselves, into the other world of tv commercials, consumer guilt, family pressures, and such things like worries about money while decorating with tinsel, being bombarded with carols in the stores and hearing promises of incredible interest-free financing for 18 months. We may light candles in church, but we, like the people of scripture, still live in the zone of darkness.

Just because Christmas is coming doesn't mean that sicknesses are leaving, or worn out, fragile bodies will suddenly gain skills. Just because Christmas is coming doesn't mean that jobs will suddenly appear and tensions between us disappear. The birth of Jesus doesn't erase the sickness of a child or the pain of the loss of a lifelong partner.

And that is where Advent's absurdity is a profound and blessed gift to us, says Kara Root, a Presbyterian pastor. For advent is about honesty. Advent lets us get to those places of waiting and unearth them, hold them out in front of us and cry out, "Come, Lord Jesus!". Because when all the rest of the world would rush us out of our darkness and shush us into cheer, Advent calls to us to prepare and keep awake. To see the need, hold the

sorrow, and sit in the dark; waiting and holding hands with the world's pain, with each other's pain, with our pain.

But Christmas is, and will, still come. Turn back to the gospel today of Mark. This is the beginning, Mark says. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is, (today is), the beginning not only of Mark's story, but of our own lives as Christians as well. Mark's story of the good news may begin with John the Baptist but it continues on up to this day, into our own very lives. For with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. And we continue to story with our own lives.

And that's the challenge. In Advent we learn that Christmas does really change things. Be prepared. That God came near, that God entered in, means everything is new and different. I hope you really believe that. I hope you really hold on to the fact that our God is a God of salvation, of new and redeemed beginnings in a world that has become very ridiculous and absurd most days.

So starting right now, how would you write your story, beginning with the news of Jesus Christ and right up to wherever you find yourself today in life? What does your story say about how you claim light in the darkness? How you are light in the darkness in His name? How does the birth of Christ change the absurdity your days, or this world, have created? What is ready to be birthed within you? Since this is the beginning of a new church year, I want to know, and Christ Church wants to know, what one new thing you might want to learn about, what one new spiritual practice you would like to discover, what one new question would you like to be able to discuss during this coming year?

In the election year to come, we'll hear more political rhetoric. We'll participate in more consumerism (and Christmas shopping reminds us of that). There will be more foreclosures and joblessness, more illness, more natural disasters and more delays of personal dreams. But something new is happening, something different, and something more, and it can be found if you and I were to take one more step, journeying towards Bethlehem, and into personal relationship with our God this year. The God who creates light out of darkness, gives life to the dead and celebrates in new beginnings.

This is the beginning, says Mark. The beginning of the good news. And that's the gospel truth. *Amen.*