

LIVING IN HOPE
The First Sunday of Advent
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The last time I preached on our lectionary texts for this morning was on the First Sunday of Advent in 2017. December 2017. I don't know about you, but that almost feels like another lifetime to me. I mentioned my daughter's fear of climate change in that sermon – she was eight years old then – and when I reflected back this week, I was struck by the fact that she is now living with a direct consequence of climate change in the form of the pandemic. Watching her trudge off to her first year of middle school two days a week with an extra heavy backpack because she can't use her locker during COVID, hearing about her days with a cohort of eight children, with no all-school gatherings, no opportunities to make new friends, with three days per week looking at screens – I think if I had described this three years ago it would have seemed surreal and frightening. It *is* surreal and frightening, more so than it could ever have been in her imagination, as she lives it in real time. “Do the days seem strange to you?” she will often ask. “Does my room look different? It doesn't seem like (fill in the blank) Tuesday, or Sunday, or Halloween, or Thanksgiving ...” Nothing is the same. And everything runs together. She wonders what life holds for her. And very honestly, it is heartbreaking for me as a father.

I want to be truthful and hopeful at the same time – which is exactly the position Advent invites us to take. As Isaiah says, if we are truthful there is no denying the deteriorated states into which we have fallen personally. And as Mark says, if we are truthful, we have every reason to expect calamity with respect to the fate of the earth.

But both Isaiah and Mark extend hope. Isaiah actually reminds God, and reminds us, that God is our Creator: “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” (Isaiah 64:8) We continue in God's image and likeness, regardless of our transgressions. And Mark reminds us that any calamity into which our planet falls is not the end of the story: that Christ will come to redeem and transform the world: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” (Mark 13:26-27) So our challenge is this: to be honest with ourselves about the state of our own souls and the state of the world, while embracing the hope that the end of the story – both of us individually and of the Creation itself – will be written by God.

While both the personal and the collective are Advent concerns, Advent is especially a time of introspection: it emphasizes the personal. Remembering that we are each God's creation allows us to reflect on what kinds of stewards we have been of this incredible gift. **Advent is a time for personal inventory.** We must ask: in what ways are we Christ-like presences in the world? And in what parts of our lives is it unlikely that we are reminding anyone of the truth of what God is like?

Asking and answering these questions can and should result in very concrete decisions to make changes in our lives: internally, in our relationships, and in how we care for the earth. If each one of us is a part of God's Creation, shouldn't we be caring for Creation in the same way we are caring for ourselves and others? How well do our lifestyles meet this standard?

But as we seek to make the changes we need to make – to be better individuals, better spouses, better parents, better friends, better brothers and sisters in Christ, better stewards of Creation – we are also reconnected in Advent with the truth that our task is not to succeed but to be faithful. It is God who will bring all the good work we are doing to fruition. Our job is to be as faithful as possible to God's will and purposes for us and for the world until Christ comes to make all things new.

Back to my daughter for a moment. I must agree with her about the strangeness of this time. Things are not as they were before. And while the pandemic, by the grace of God, may be behind us before long, our world will continue to change. There is much more strangeness to come.

But Advent reminds me as a father – and all of us as people of faith – that there is no harsh truth that is not also accompanied by hope. God will heal and transform the world, and finally make all things new. Our job, until God does, is to try our best, and to be our best.

So, I want my daughter to know that living in hope involves discovering the calling God has for each one of us to use our gifts to bring love and care to the world. She often says that she is saddened by food insecurity. She knows that 50 million Americans are food insecure, 17 million of them children. I want her to understand that the strangeness of the times in which she lives, and the tragedy of food insecurity, are parts of the same phenomenon: the same forces involved in the collapse of our environment are driving more people into poverty and hunger. Perhaps the sadness she feels points to a calling in her life; the pain we feel often points us towards our spiritual gifts. There is much she can do in her life to address food insecurity if she chooses to. If she embraces this choice, or some other calling, she will be living in the spirit of Advent: confronting painful truths, while living in hope that something can be done about them.

2017 does seem like a lifetime ago. Things are, on the face of it, measurably worse than they were, even frighteningly worse. But God's call to us to be both truthful and hopeful has not changed. It is the same holy calling it has always been. So come, Lord Jesus. And until You do, may we try our best, and be our best.