

Welcome to Advent.

We've turned another page of the liturgical calendar. Having put Reign of Christ Sunday to bed, we found that another year was over.

So we begin again. Advent is the season of the Church calendar that opens our new year. It's a season of expectant waiting, anticipating Christmas, the Christ child, God's coming into the world. Joy is on the way, with carols, gifts, celebration, candle-lit expectation and good tidings. But it's not here yet. I think it wise that the church doesn't start the new year immediately with all that good stuff - where would we go next? Beyond that practical wisdom though, it really seems to matter that we begin each new year in this way - in waiting.

The Thessalonians were in a time of waiting themselves. Paul wrote this letter before any of the gospels were written, so it was through the work of Paul and the stories of Jesus passed on orally that this community had formed. Jesus' words from our gospel reading today - "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these have taken place" represent a widespread belief in the first century (one certainly shared by these Thessalonians) that Christ would come again in their lifetime.

But things weren't going well for the Thessalonians. Their fledgling community was faltering. One of the main issues was that in their wait for Christ's triumphal return, beloved members were dying. Questions were rising in the face of these deaths: What would happen to these beloved dead when Jesus did come back? By dying, had they somehow failed? Why was Jesus taking so long? Was their patient waiting all for nothing in the end?

I'm not sure the Thessalonians had a copy of the Psalms to turn to, but Psalm 25 seems to echo some of their concerns - "Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame... Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love." It speaks of those who are waiting in expectancy and anticipating God's coming. But it speaks too of a shape that waiting might take.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord
teach me your paths
Lead me in your truth
for I wait for you

Paul replied to the concerns of the Thessalonian community, urging them not to grieve "as others do who have no hope" - for the dead in Christ are not forgotten. I wonder though, IF those "People of the Way" struggling in Thessalonica had HAD this psalm, might they have understood their waiting differently?

These words of Psalm 25 give us a different way of seeing Advent. Rather than a “state” of static waiting, we might think of Advent as a path. There is movement on a path, and lots of variation as you move along. There is room in Advent for variation in the quality of our waiting. “How long O Lord?” comes from another Psalm. It’s a question we have all known, for the urgency of our waiting for God to enter into our lives (to intervene) comes for us all eventually: Our waiting is never static - the path is always changing as we go. But thinking of Advent as a path is helpful for another reason. For, while the path is always changing along the way, the path is also changing us. Over time, the path begins to “work on us.”

That’s true of really anything you are exposed to over time (whether a particular relationship, a pattern of self-medication, or scripture). It’s over time that this Advent path forms us into a people that waits, that expects and anticipates God’s intervention. There’s more to be said about that but what surprises me about Advent is that as it forms us it also shows us ourselves - like a mirror’s reflection in which we can track the change. You might describe the change you see as “the shedding of pretense.” For seeing ourselves in the light of Advent’s influence, and **staying with what we see**, the view focuses over time and we come to see something our pretense once prevented: Our deep longing.

What is it that you long for today? What is it that brings a yearning ache to your heart, overwhelming you with want? What is the desire that leaves you with not a word but “Lord, have mercy”?

There is no other season of the church year that brings us to this place better. As a path that leads to contact with our deepest longings (longings for ourselves and for the world) all that hinders that contact soon falls away. As it opens us up to these longings, we move past all the insulation and protections we bury them in - all we do to avoid feeling that ache. But once it finds them, Advent holds that space open, and says "Don't look away. Stay alert to it, be on guard for it. For what you are waiting for is for that ache, for that longing, to be fully known."

If that sounds like an uncomfortable space to be in, it is. Advent takes us to this place, and helps us to linger there, but it doesn't leave us there.

In our gospel reading today Jesus gives us some powerful images - “signs” in the Sun, Moon, and Stars, people fainting, the powers of the heavens shaken, and the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And then, there’s the fig tree.

I’m not sure why but this image worked on me this week. Maybe it’s the bareness of the trees here on South Adams, or the description of “sprouting leaves” amid the darkening days and cooler temperatures. Maybe it’s this beautiful tree that’s come to life this week in our sanctuary. Whatever it is, I think Jesus’ using the image of this tree tells us something about where this Advent path leads.

Jeremiah speaks of the “righteous Branch” of David, that will “spring up” - that will execute justice and righteousness, bringing restoration and safety to all people. This Branch, for Jeremiah, is the promise being fulfilled.

This promise we will find fulfilled in the place of rest we find in the stable not so many weeks from now. This promise fulfilled is for the sake of our own blooming - sprouting leaves and shade and bearing fruit abundantly. This promise of God fulfilled in, through and among poor and broken lives 2000 years ago is for the blooming of all people in all places and times. Advent is the path that will prepare us to meet the great blooming that God desires for us all and for this world.

The ache of your longing will guide the way this Advent, for that ache is the Spirit, knowing the "un-fulfilled" that lives in your life, that stands between you and your blooming, and the Spirit aches with you. But that ache is also the Spirit's urging you on to the hope that awaits you, that awaits us all, in Christ's coming.

Through the words and support of Paul, and perhaps the stories they continued to tell of Jesus and God's intervention in the life of the world through him, the Thessalonian community may have endured. Perhaps they found themselves not only "People of the Way" but "People of the Wait."

Expectant hope marks the journey we take in these first weeks of the year. We expect the inbreaking of God into our lives even as we wait for it. We encounter our deep longing as the land sheds its last leaves and daylight dwindles to growing darkness. But God walks with us as we start, leading us in the path, teaching it to us with steadfast love and faithfulness. God holds our longing with us and brings us to the place where we can stand, head raised and see our redemption drawing near.

AMEN