

This is the first Sunday of Advent and therefore the first Sunday of the church year and we just passed Black Friday and so we have entered the time of preparation for Christmas—for Christ coming, in both the church and in secular consumerism. Yet, if we are here, here at the start of a new church year considering the prospect of waiting and readying ourselves...

This year has already been the cause of a hundred million nightmares: record wildfires in Australia, and in the western United States. There were radioactive wildfires at Chernobyl, the pentagon released UFO videos taken from Naval planes, hundreds of billions of locusts swarmed east Africa, a game-changing size asteroid came through earth's orbit, we had worldwide protests of racial injustice, a global pandemic of a mysterious virus, and the breakout of Asian murder hornets into North America.

The words of Isaiah more than resonate with us today: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” how many have cried out for intervention in the midst of the chaos we have been living in? How many have yearned for God to upset the scene, and put an end to wildfires, the suffering of loved one's covid infections, or the distance and loneliness of life in a pandemic?

How many times we heard someone say, “I just want things to back to normal?” How many times have we said this ourselves?

Jesus told his followers that the end times would come, when neither the sun nor moon would shine and the stars of the sky would fall. Yet, also included, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” And thus, Jesus concludes with an exhortation to wait, keep awake, prepare, for the time is unknown.

And this message seems no less poignant for our exact situation, on the 29th of November, 2020, for we have been waiting... We have been waiting on the novel coronavirus infections to abate, we have been waiting for new insights that would allow us to adapt and live a bit more normally. We have been waiting on cities, states, and the federal government to coordinate a better, safer response. We have been waiting on Pfizer, and Moderna, and BioNTech, and other pharmaceuticals to create vaccines that would bring us closer to ending the pandemic.

We also haven't been good at waiting in this pandemic. As a population, as a nation, we haven't done what we have needed to bring the virus under control. We haven't been able to wait through the guidance to distance, to stay at home, to avoid crowds, to wear masks, wash hands. We have done a poor job of waiting.

But the exhortation to wait may not be the final word from Jesus here. Mark's parable has something else going on. *"Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn."* David Lose notes that these "four "time-stamps" of the parable – evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn – [] mark the scenes of the passion about to commence – gathering with his disciples at evening, betrayed and arrested at midnight, denied at cockcrow, and sentenced to death at dawn." (David Lose, Advent 1 B—Small Things) They foreshadow the scene of Jesus' execution to come—in order to point "to God's surprising, even hidden, appearance and in-breaking in and through Jesus' cross." (Ibid.) This is because "at the heart of the Christmas story is the promise that God not only came in the small and vulnerable form of a baby born to poor and frightened parents, but that God keeps coming in small, vulnerable, unexpected, and unlooked for ways even now. In fact, each time we reach out to another in love, God is once again invading the kingdoms and structures of this world with God's radical and transformative presence and grace." (Ibid.)

And this might give us pause to consider how the story of old and God's continued work in the world might come together for us in this year of 2020, at this beginning of the Advent Season as we prepare and wait for Christ to come in the celebration of Christmas, but also as Messiah, and God of all in the second coming. If indeed ours is the God who shows up in surprising and unexpected ways to break open the world with grace and love, how will we be part of this God-work this Advent? How could we participate in breaking through the cold and ice with a surprise of warmth? How might we make love appear in the midst of despair?

My mother has created a recent family tradition for our thanksgiving gatherings. It is participation in a Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services program. Individuals and congregations around the country are invited to create cards with messages of hope for the children and families who are in detention centers, many still separated from their families.

Cards are sent to First English Lutheran Church in Baltimore and then distributed to detention centers around the country. You can find more on the LIRS website.

Some are making calls and talking with other folks who are socially distanced and too separated from others.

Others are packing food for the many, many who are facing hard times right now.

As Rev. Dr. David Lose writes, “this year, and particularly because our preparations and celebrations will be necessity be a bit more muted, perhaps we’ll be able to hear that promise more clearly: that whenever and wherever we act in love, God is present. So indeed, watch, wait, look, and most especially listen, for in the Christ child who will grow up to embrace all of our longings and experience all aspects of our life, God is whispering, “Emmanuel, I am with you!”” (Ibid.)