

Reflections on Faith and Life for Advent 1, November 29, 2020

Advent! The season of watchfulness, preparation, and hope. The season when the church anticipates the celebration of God's coming in the form of the Christ child, and also the final coming of Christ at "the end of the ages."

"In the midst of a pandemic, Advent seems different this year. In some ways it feels as if the entire year has been a long "advent" waiting on a vaccine, hoping for coronavirus case counts to decrease, and longing to gather in person. We continue to pray for our world, for creation, for an end to injustice, because we know that God's promises persist. We know God is near. We pray for our faith to be strengthened, so we may be transformed to walk in God's way. This is the promise of Advent" (Deacon John Weit, Assistant to ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, and Executive for Worship).

For me, it feels as if the whole year since March 18th has been a "waiting" for 2020 to happen. Without regular worship services I'm adrift. How can we be in Advent when Easter, Pentecost, Reformation, and All Saints Day haven't "happened"? There've been times during the past eight months when I've asked the most important question we learned in seminary: *Where is God in all this?*

Thank God, the answer is the basic truth of our faith: God is here, within and among us, his beloved children. He's in the medical community strengthening and guiding doctors who diagnose and treat COVID sufferers; in the nurses caring for those who struggle to breathe, and holding the hands of those who die while their families and friends are kept from them. He's present with the scientists seeking new therapies and vaccines so that we may live more safely in the future. God is present in all who pray.

God is here, within and among us, his called and chosen ones. He's in those who serve their neighbors with prayer, with food and clothing, with shelter and comfort; in the organizations that constantly seek to aid the last, the least, the little, the lonely, the lost: Circle of Joy, the Salvation Army, the Warming Center, the Women's Community Shelter, Doctors without Borders and Mercy Ships, bringing medical care to countries some of us haven't even heard of. God is present in all who pray.

God is here in those who suffer injustice, prejudice, persecution. These words from Steve Garnaas-Holmes, based on Jesus' parable about the sheep and the goats, didn't arrive until after last week's worship packet had been sent out, but they speak to my heart:

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*“Lord, when did we see you shot dead in the street and not cry out? When did we see you walking in the desert and not leave water for you? When did we see you deported or carted off to prison and not protest? When did we see you separated from your family and put in a cage, and not reach out? When did we see you struggling in the ICU, or the nursing home, or on the locked ward, and not come to you?” And he will answer... (Matthew 25:45). – For me, God is present in Steve’s Garnaas-Holmes’ *Unfolding Light*.*

So we move on into the season of Advent. I hope you have an Advent wreath, or candles you’ll light every Sunday. Each week now I’ll print out the prayer for the lighting of that day’s candle (from *Sundays & Seasons*, 2020 Augsburg Fortress).

First Sunday of Advent: We praise you, O God, for this evergreen crown that marks our days of preparation for Christ’s advent. As we light the first candle on this wreath, rouse us from sleep, that we may be ready to greet our Lord when he comes with all the saints and angels. Enlighten us with your grace, and prepare our hearts to welcome him with joy. Grant this through Christ our Lord, whose coming is certain and whose day draws near. Amen.

Advent blessings to you! Wait for Jesus to come (again)! For he will surely come (again)!