

December 3, 2017
First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7,16-18
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

Good morning! In case you didn't know...this is the first Sunday of Advent. And, if there is one theme that typically stands out during the season of Advent – it's the theme of waiting. It's the idea that we are supposed to begin a process of preparation in the coming weeks. A time of contemplation and meditation on the coming of Christ. A time to patiently wait for something that will happen one day, at some point. And so, we withhold our celebration until another time, another place. At least until Christmas Eve.

And, liturgically speaking, we aren't even supposed to sing our tried and true Christmas carols during Advent because symbolically, Christ hasn't arrived yet so we withhold our celebration until the appropriate time. But, I am here to tell you, sometimes, we can't wait any longer.

So, today, we are going to upend that tradition and begin our celebration today, right now. Because there are times that call us to claim Christ in our midst in this very moment. When we have had enough of suffering, when we have had enough uncertainty, when we have had enough pain. It's those times when waiting isn't an option. It's those times when the preparation isn't possible and there is only one resolution that will lift us out of our darkest places. It's those times when we say, the words of Isaiah, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." God, come down now and be with me.

Here is the good news...today is the beginning of a new church year. Each Advent we start a new cycle in our life as a church and we don't have to wait until January 1st to mark a new beginning. The first Sunday of Advent ushers in a new start, a second chance, a starting over with ourselves and with God. And that's not something we have to wait on because it starts today. Wherever you have been, whatever this past year has brought you, whatever you have been challenged with, today is a new start.

If you have come through these doors struggling with your faith, if you have come through these doors in a place of despair, if you have come through these doors suffering with grief or loss or guilt, I want you to come ready to celebrate. Ready to know that Christ is already in your midst. And the Gospel calls us to keep awake, keep awake and look. Look for the savior who is right here.

Now, let me say I was troubled by the idea of having to keep awake because as anyone in my family knows it's genetically impossible for me to stay awake. I get it honestly through my mother who is notorious for falling asleep anytime and anywhere. And when we would ask, mom, are you asleep? She would say, "No, I'm just resting my eyes." Let me tell you, I am great at resting my eyes. Every time we sit down to a movie (at home or in the theatre), every time I get in the car for a drive (in the passenger seat of course), every time I try to read a book. I

have failed Keeping Awake 101 more times than I can count. So as I read Mark I thought, God, don't make me stay awake too terribly long. And, thank goodness, we don't have to.

This past week, we completed our bible study of the Gospel of John and chapter 20 holds one of my favorite passages of scripture. Mary Magdalene has just come to the empty tomb of Jesus. It's still somewhat dark in the garden and she notices someone near her. She assumes it's the gardener. And in her grief, through her tears and her despair she fails to recognize Christ standing right next to her. She is so overcome with sadness and loneliness. And in the most beautiful moment, Jesus calls her by name. He says, "Mary," and as she looks up she realizes that Jesus has been with her the entire time. In the fog of the morning, in trying to be awake enough to see, she hears her name and in that moment recognizes that her suffering is over. Her waiting is no more.

In our bible study we talked about those times we have been called by name, out of the depths of whatever challenge we have been faced with, out of the darkness that has overtaken our lives. Those times when we thought we were alone but we heard something calling to us. We were able to keep awake through the hard times to finally realize that God was with us the entire time. It wasn't an equation of someday God will help us or a question of when God would provide comfort. We realized it was already there. We just had to look.

In Mark chapter 13, Jesus provides his longest speech of all the Gospels. This speech is often referred to as the "little apocalypse." And in this speech Jesus is acknowledging a sense of crisis in the people's midst. And, rightly so. Because only a few decades after Jesus gave this speech, the temple was destroyed in 70 CE. The center of religious, economic, and political life came crashing down on the people of Israel. And, yet, this Gospel foreshadows a critical point – it promises that we can transcend those difficult times because all of us have faced our own little apocalypses in our lives. Those times where the rug was jerked out from under us and we had to put the pieces back together. The times when life didn't make sense and we didn't know where to turn. Those times when we didn't know if we would make it through the day.

The Gospel knows we will face these kind of times. Jesus is trying to say that he is near – not tomorrow, not some time in the future, but now. So keep awake and don't miss the opportunity to see Jesus right here, right now. Expect Christ today. Here your name called today.

That's the celebration.

Today begins a new church year. It doesn't require resolutions or even a fancy party. The newness is already upon us. Advent is a moment that changes everything and helps us realize that we are indeed worthy of so much love and so much goodness in our lives.

Today also marks another new start for this congregation. Hopefully you all received a letter this week or heard the announcement at breakfast this morning that we are embarking on a new chapter in our life together. I will transition from my position as Priest-in-charge to Rector

beginning in January. For some of you, this will seem like a technicality because we have already been working together for 18 months and you may be thinking what's the big deal about a title? It's true that it will be a seamless transition in what you see day to day but it represents a deeply prayerful journey for both myself and the vestry. The Priest-in-charge position provides a period of time for discernment, a time to reflect on where God is leading us as a body of Christ. The calling of a Rector takes place only after we have spent many months seeking God's guidance and considering where the Holy Spirit is jointly calling us. In other words, we have been looking for Jesus in our midst. We have been keeping awake for what that means for Grace Church.

I want to tell you how special it is to be able to reflect back upon these last 18 months and see Christ so active in this community, to see the spirit of welcome and love come through in everything that you do. I have gotten to know your individual stories and your faith journeys. I have gotten to know your hopes and your disappointments. I have gotten to know your joys and your sorrows. And, I have seen the spirit of restoration move through this place with incredible impact.

With this transition, we say as a community that we want to continue to grow together. We want to continue to build the body of Christ in Goochland with one another. We say that we are awake and ready to listen and to respond to how God is leading us.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians - he reminds them that they have everything that they need. He sees their good work and encourages them to keep going. It's a beautiful testimony to folks who have stayed awake and claimed Christ in their midst. I want all of you to hear that same message...we are incredibly blessed as a congregation and we will continue to be strengthened. As a community, we will lift up one another through our hard times, reflect the love of Christ in one another and build this body of faith to be a place of hope for this community.

So as we begin Advent, let's remember to celebrate. Let's remember to not miss Christ in our midst today. And, let's start this new year with knowledge that each of our names has been called. Thanks be to God.