

Hope in the Darkness
 The Rev. Amy Spagna
 December 1, 2024 – Advent 1C
 Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

LIGHT is one of the key themes of the season of Advent. The Collect for today – the opening prayer which sets the tone for the day and helps us collect our thoughts – puts us there right away: "Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light..." It is not the kind of light we get by flipping a switch on the wall. It's more like "And God said, 'let there be light'" or "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it." It's the light of God's very presence – and a tangible sign of our hope that this presence is indeed with us. Our prayers to that effect can be summed up in the first verse of the children's hymn *Light One Candle*:

*"Light one candle to watch for Messiah;
 let the light banish darkness.
 He shall bring salvation to Israel;
 God fulfills the promise."¹*

Here are the notes of hope present in this change of season. They are found not just in a new liturgical year, but also in how God fulfills God's promise of faithfulness to God's people in the midst of the worst the world has to offer. Whether it's how that promise shows up in restoring Jerusalem after its destruction at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, or the Son of Man coming in a cloud, it's clear that God is about to do something. If we wait and keep watch, we will see it happen. The catch is, watching and waiting don't come easily to us. We're used to being able to

¹ Wayne W. Wold, "Light One Candle to Watch for the Messiah." *With One Voice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), 630.

get whatever we want, whenever we want it; as the old Burger King jingle went, "your way, right away!" So the notion of slowing down, even just a little, and waiting for the good stuff to simply happen is more than a little foreign.

Waiting for Christ's return is second nature to the Church. We've been doing it for 2000 years, and will keep doing it until that unnamed day when it finally happens. Historically speaking, Advent has provided a focused time of preparation for this event – hence its name, which derives from a Latin word which means "arrival." How this season is marked varies widely across the Christian tradition. There are some denominations which ignore it altogether. The Orthodox treat the season much like Lent, with an emphasis on self-examination and repenting of one's sins. Among the so-called Western churches – including the Roman Catholics, the Lutherans, Methodists, and us Episcopalians - the season has somewhat recently evolved from a penitential time to one of hopeful waiting.² This shift is one of the reasons why we use blue vestments and hangings in this season, instead of purple ones. Purple, the color of kings, has come to symbolize penance and mourning, where blue, due part to its association with the Virgin Mary, is the color of hope and expectation.³ So you might say that we've dressed the part of a people which is eagerly anticipating what we were told will happen.

Prophets like Jeremiah, and even the gospel writers, don't necessarily outline all that clearly what exactly it is that we are looking for. Even Isaiah, whose famous

² Dennis Bratcher, "The Season of Advent: Anticipation and Hope." <http://www.crivoice.org/cyadvent.html> [accessed November 27, 2024].

³ "Liturgical Colors of the Church." <http://doers.org/liturgical-colors-of-the-church/> [accessed November 27, 2024].

prophecy about the young woman who will have a son and name him Emmanuel – "God With Us" – which we want to read as referring specifically to Jesus, doesn't go so far as to name a date and a place. About all we can be certain is that God will act to put an end to the injustice and oppression inflicted on the world by a host of human-made ills. The concrete reality of what that looks like, never mind how God will go about accomplishing it, are more than a bit murky. Jeremiah in particular was far more concerned about the injustices and abuses of power of his own day, and how the coming destruction was God's way of punishing leaders for their collective failures. It is only after that happens that God will "... cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute peace and justice in the land" (Jer 33:15, NRSV)

Fast forwarding some 500 years, Jesus himself has a similar warning for those who asked him about the end of the world: "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21:26-7, NRSV). It's not exactly a pie-in-the-sky, happy Hollywood ending. However, like any other apocalypse, its purpose is to "... call us to affirm that the present [day] is not the final chapter."⁴

God gets the last word on the matter, not whatever evils are at work. And that is why we can have hope, even in this dark time. Everything we know about God tells us we can trust the promise that if we just wait for it, that better future will come to pass... sometime. It will happen precisely because God is faithful, even when people are not,

⁴ Dennis Bratcher, "First Sunday of Advent Commentary on the Text: Jeremiah 33:14-16." <https://www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearC/Cadvent1ot.html> [accessed November 25, 2024].

and God never stops calling us to trust that God's faithfulness can, and will get us out of whatever troublesome situation we might find ourselves in.⁵

The Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson, the former bishop of New Hampshire, reminded the community at National Cathedral of this reality just last weekend: "... [I]t's the way God is and it's the way God is always going to be. And God is going to undo our penchant for 'us versus them' until there is no more 'them' just 'us'.

"What we celebrate... is that we, you and I, actually know how this is going to end. All this hate and chaos and pain and fear will not prevail because in the end, God wins, and love wins. We may not know when or how. We may have horrible setbacks. We may not live to see it to its conclusion. And yes, there will be times when we will be unhappy, but in the midst of our unhappiness, we are never without hope. And we are sustained by the joy and peace, which comes with knowing that in the end, love wins. You and I are called to join God in that effort. [Every time we participate in baptizing someone into this community, we are also] recommitting ourselves to respect the dignity of every human being. Every human being. Those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree. And to resist evil whenever it happens.

"We will find a way to respect and to love in the face of evil and hate. And in that, we will be saved. Because Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. And God is love. And God's love eventually wins."

And "In those days Judah shall be delivered and Israel shall dwell secure" (Jer 33:14a, JPS).

⁵ Ibid.