

Preparing for "God With Us"

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

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Advent Preparation Sunday

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Philippians 2:1-9,

and verses from Isaiah 60, Mark 1 & 13 and Luke 1

The newspaper, *The Guardian*, had a headline on Tuesday that said, “No matter who wins the US election, here are reasons to be hopeful.” A series of very short statements followed by the Revs. William Barber and Cori Bush and others. One of the statements was by Nikayla Jefferson who is a recent college graduate and a leader in the Sunrise Movement working to stop climate change and create jobs.

I am going to share with you her entire statement because it embodies the spirit of Advent, and particularly the spirit that we need this year. She writes,

“Today is election day. Only time will reveal the world to come, but before it does, I want you to know: we are here because someone carried a dream by torchlight.

“Through the darkness, they kept their feet firmly fixed on the horizon. With righteous courage, they marched steadily towards a vision of a United States truer to its founding promise: justice. We are here because they grew tired, stretched their arm to pass on the light, and we took up this torch and continued on.

“Right now I am scared, too. Caught between Covid and our climate crisis, the darkness is deep and disorienting. I am afraid I will be the one to let the flame die out.

“All I have to do is take a second and look to the line of little flames that march beside me, stretched into the curve of the Earth. I am not alone. Darkness grows, but so does our fire. The path more perilous, but we stay faithful to our vision. And this moment is just an obstacle. We will find a way through because the consequences of stopping are not an option. We know you, and all the generations to come, depend on us to continue on.

“I want you to know, that today, tomorrow, and forever, I will carry this torch for you. We must be close, the sun about to crack and spill over the horizon, because it is always darkest before the light.”

Nikayla’s hope is itself a light shining in the darkness.

The First Sunday of Advent falls this year on November 29th, when we light the candle of Hope. Advent is rich with many themes and metaphors and with beautiful scriptures, rituals and music, but first and foremost Advent is about hope, and first and foremost in November 2020, hope is what we need as a torch to light our way through the darkness of this time.

Hope that we will be able to find a way to work together in a nation so polarized. Hope we will address the crises of racism and economic inequity and environmental devastation.

Hope also that our children will find hope as Nikayla has in a world that looks so bleak to them. Hope that we will be able to endure the hardships and losses we are suffering. Hope that our homes, communities and democracy will hold together under increasing strains.

It can feel hopeless to have so many big hopes, but Advent reminds us that really they all come down to one hope, the hope expressed in the word “Emmanuel,” which means “God with us.”

The message of Advent is that a higher power is coming into the world that is great enough to fulfill all these hopes.

It is coming in three ways: first, in the arrival of a baby at Christmas who will grow up to show us how to have this power in our lives; second, in the eventual arrival of the realm of God on earth, an approaching highly evolved age when human hearts and governments will be ruled by the Spirit of love and justice; and third in the arrival right now, in every moment, of the power we are waiting for in Advent.

Because God is with us now, Christ is with us now, the Holy Spirit is truly with us now in every breath, with all the comfort, guidance and strength we need.

Today’s scriptures describe the hopes that the power of God With Us can fulfill.

The Prophet Jeremiah talks of justice, righteousness and peace restored to the nation.

The Prophet Isaiah says: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will appear over you.”

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist said, “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Mary, in her Magnificat, sang, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”

Those are the beautiful hopes Advent places in the God With Us that is coming to us even now.

Advent was designed by the ancient church to be a time of preparing ourselves to receive that power. Part of what we need to do to prepare is summed up by Jesus saying, “Beware, keep alert...keep awake.” Advent is a time for waiting in the silent darkness wide open to the coming of the light, a time for mindfulness, heartfulness and watchfulness..

Paul describes other aspects of our Advent task in the second chapter of Philippians. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.”

Advent is a time for self-emptying, called kenosis in our spiritual tradition, which is what Centering Prayer and other contemplative practices train us to do. Self-emptying changes our heart and mind to be like the Spirit-filled consciousness of Jesus who was able to see the oneness of all people and all creation and meet them with compassion and love.

So Advent is also a time of humbly considering as most important the people our society neglects and oppresses. During Advent we rededicate ourselves to serve the interests of people suffering from social, economic and environmental injustice. We practice shining light to prepare for the coming of greater light.

Advent prepares us for the transformation of ourselves that will make us able to transform the world, like shepherds watching their flocks who then were able to see angels, like Magi who practiced watching the sky and so could be guided by a star. Like Mary, we practice self-emptying, saying yes to the sacrifice required to give birth to the light of the world, like those who brought gifts to a homeless child born in a barn and lying in a feed trough.

The Holy Spirit has urgent work for us to do that no one else can do. It has a dream for humanity, for the earth, and it needs us to carry one of the torches to light its way.

Advent can prepare us to receive God With Us, a light for all the darknesses we face, but we have to prepare for Advent’s time of preparation or we will miss the angels and stars that it will offer us.

So ask yourself, what higher power do you need in your life right now? What torch is the world calling you to carry? What can you do this Advent to prepare and open wide to the gifts of light and love it can bring?

Let us pray in silence...