

Let me begin by wishing you a very happy new year. Advent Sunday is the first day of the churches' calendar. Today we start a new liturgical year. And Advent is a great and rich season. It's a penitential season which is why I'm wearing purple, the only other time we wear this is in Lent. And although Advent calendars always depict Christmas and increasingly chocolate-filled scenes, Advent is not actually about getting ready for Christmas. It's much deeper and darker than that. It's about getting ready for the coming of Jesus the second time, at the end of time, and it's about pondering our life from that perspective of the end. And Advent as a season often gets squeezed. We can move so seamlessly from the feasting of Thanksgiving to the consumerism of Black Friday, to the Jingle bells of Christmas and completely skip over Advent, although I think this year will be different.

This year we're poised to give Advent it's due notice. This is the year in the midst of an ever worsening pandemic to keep a truly Adventy Advent, because Advent always begins in the dark. And this is symbolized dramatically in our Advent Carol Service, and that's my favorite service of the whole year. And it starts in darkness, and the choir slowly move, and as the service progresses, the congregation pass a light one to the other to symbolize the emerging Advent hope. But it begins in darkness. Advent is a time of lamentation. It's a time to be honest, to ask the difficult question and to face up to the dark reality of our condition. Advent is a time to say the difficult thing that needs to be said. Advent requires us to eschew all forms of denial, all polite piety and cheap cheer, and allow the radical honesty of scripture to shine through.

Which is why the reading we heard first from the prophet Isaiah is such a great reading for today. Isaiah gives us the permission in that reading to get real and to tell the truth. The passage that we read there, it's a prayer, one of the great prayers of the old Testament. It's actually a prayer that begins in the previous chapter, chapter 63, and it begins like this. The prophet prays, "Look down from heaven and see from your Holy and gracious habitation, where is your zeal and your might? Where is your compassion? They are withheld from me.." and he carries on in similar vein till he gets to where our passage today

starts. "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down." That's the prayer of a desperate man desperately calling upon God. He's gone from calling on God to look down, to come down in the prayer we've had read. Isaiah is with the people of Israel in exile, in Babylon. He's seen their situation throughout his life and ministry go from bad to worse. And he sees no way out. He's pleading here with God to intervene, to do something. "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down...". Do something God, get us out of this mess. Advent encourages us to recognize with the prophet Isaiah, that the world is not as it should be. It's out of balance. Something's gone terribly wrong. There was plenty wrong before a tiny virus came and wreaked havoc all over the world. The reading from Mark with its imagery of the coming kingdom is an acknowledgement of the impermanence of this world. What we see around us is not the final word, a new and glorious kingdom is coming at an hour we know not when. We recognize that the darkness of this world can only be overcome within the intervention from outside, from another realm.

Getting back to the Isaiah passage, after the prophet has called on God to come down and enter this world, we see a shift in the reading in his prayer, and Isaiah becomes very aware of his own failings and shortcomings. "We have transgressed," he says, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth." And I can understand this shift, you know how it is when you invite someone from outside the family, you invite someone into your home (this is in the good old days) and they come and they look around the house and you're suddenly aware of all the dust and clutter. You come to the realization that all that you've lived with has to be dealt with, all this stuff that you've pushed to one side. That's certainly true in our house. I miss people coming into our house. It was actually the only time that we really tied it up.

Advent is a time to reflect on our lives from that outside perspective, to see our lives in the knowledge that God is coming, and the Christian messages that God's coming to us, and it's not dependent on us getting our lives in order. The Christian understanding is that God meets us in our mess. The call on us is not to make ourselves neat and tidy to meet with God,

it's to reflect on our lives, and to admit that we have sinned, that we've not followed God perfectly. It's that posture of humility, which prepares us to host God's presence.

Advent is not a time to get our life sorted, it's more of a time to be honest about our failings and our limitations. It's a time to admit that we need help from outside of ourselves. So the world is flawed and we're flawed. And the other great truth that Isaiah dares to name in this great prayer is that God is often nowhere to be found. Isaiah says, "You have hidden your face from us. You hid yourself" he cries out to God. Isaiah's experience, a feeling that God has gone missing, has been shared by God's people throughout the ages. Philip Yancey, a great contemporary writer on the subject of prayer writes this: "I experienced the same sense of abandonment just as I was making progress spiritually, advancing beyond childish faith, to the point where I felt I could help others. Suddenly the darkness descended for an entire year. My prayers seemed to go nowhere. I had no confidence that God was listening. No one had prepared me for the ministry of absence."

The prophet Isaiah is an Advent prophet because he speaks out of the darkness, out of the knowledge of God's absence. He names the emptiness we feel when God has disappeared from the scene. The desperate situation he finds himself in, stirs him to this deeply passionate prayer: "Oh, that you would tear down the heavens and come down." He's calling on a God who he feels his absent to enter into the situation. We've prayed that prayer, "God come down, enter in, come into this relationship that seems to have dried and is going nowhere, enter into my job situation because I can't see a way out beyond this month."

"Our nation is so divided, God come in, step in and help us." Desperate situations stir passionate prayers. "God come down, enter in, enter into my heart, enter into my soul, enter into this marriage, this relationship, this job, this nation, God come down." Isaiah writes about it. Advent invites us to wait on it, and Christmas reminds us that this is a prayer that God loves to answer in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This passage in Isaiah unpacks for us what it actually looks like to position ourselves to receive the

presence of God that is the deepest longing of our soul.

Advent is a time to ponder the dark side of life, the brokenness of our world, the brokenness of our lives, and the hiddenness of God. It begins in the darkness as we lament and register our yearnings. We wait in the awareness of how much we need God in our world and in our life. We wait in hope. Today we lit one candle on the Advent wreath. We know that soon we'll be lighting the fifth, the one in the middle that represents Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. We begin in darkness waiting in hope for the one who is the Light of the world, and who casts out all darkness.