

You know what time it is. It's the first Sunday of a new church year. I watched from home last week as you celebrated Reign of Christ Sunday with Pastor Aimee. All together we lay to bed that longest of church the seasons, Pentecost.

Remember with me back to Sunday, June 5 when we brought in the start of Pentecost: We gathered in our old building (remember that?) and heard the story of the Spirit descending on disciples gathered and waiting in Jerusalem. A mighty wind, tongues of fire, and languages unknown to their speakers pouring forth, calling together bystanders from all parts of the world. "How is it," they ask, "that... in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power?!" Peter stands before them and speaks to them the words of the prophet Joel:

**In the last days it will be,** God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...  
see visions... and dream dreams...

And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

Well all these weeks later, all these months later - during which we have seen tremendous change in the life of this church (change in which we stand still) we pause at the start of a new season (a new church year) and hear again word of these "last days" and the coming of the Son of Man.

The season we begin today is Advent. The word means something like 'anticipated arrival.' These four weeks of Advent we prepare for and anticipate the coming arrival of Jesus - the Word made flesh. Though for many of us I expect, we're mostly anticipating meal plans, presents for loved ones, getting everything crossed off our holiday lists and enjoying the season. The coming of Christ feels dependably expectable.

This liturgical season of anticipation and preparation perhaps "softens the blow" then of our gospel lesson. Jesus says, "...about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father..." That seems fine, but Jesus goes on to compare that day to the great flood in "the days of Noah," to people mysteriously "taken," and like a thief breaking into a house. "Keep awake therefore," he says, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." This is ominous, foreboding. You don't know when this will be. Jesus speaks in enormous contrast to the anticipation of this season. Ready for those dates circled in my calendar, and being ready for the Lord's coming sound as different as could they be!

Isaiah's image of this coming day is far less ominous, for the "ominous" was already apparent to those he was addressing: The kingdoms of Israel and Judah were feeling the threat of the Assyrian Empire, growing in strength and aggression to the east. Isaiah's first chapter lays out the **ominous** of the day clearly. But at the start of this second chapter, he begins anticipating what will be. "In the days to come" he writes, "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established... and all the nations shall stream to it." We hear an image of many peoples saying "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, that we may learn the ways of the Lord and walk in their paths." From this mountain God will judge and the people will "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks" - war will come to an end. "O house of Jacob," we read at last, "come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

"Walk in the light of the Lord" is essentially the message of Paul to the Romans. "Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day... [and] put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Live as though the day of judgment has already arrived, he's saying. "You know what time it is," he says - "how **it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.**" Salvation is near, the night far gone, the day is here. But hearing this, do you ask too Why then is it still so dark?

We are less than a month from the darkest night of the year, and so the days continue to grow short, our nights dark and long.

Colorado families and the greater LGBTQ community will be hearing Jesus' words in our gospel with great pain today. Just days before Thanksgiving a man opened fire in an LGBTQ bar in Colorado Springs, killing 5 and injuring another 25. **“One will be taken and one will be left,”** they'll hear. The long night of gun violence and violence against the LGBTQ community seems only to grow darker.

The Russian siege of Ukraine continues and the suffering of the region grows on both sides of the fighting. The economic pressures of inflation are dimming the joy of the season for people across Carbon County and around the world. The woes of individuals and communities have swelled, putting the grave and growing consequences of climate change at the furthest reaches of our attention. The works of darkness remain in our hands and the night is far gone indeed.

Paul's exhortation to **“Wake from Sleep!!!”** and the ominous tone of Jesus' words today do not help to lift the darkness. Indeed, the light of Christ is rather more concealed than apparent in our gospel reading today. What is the word of good news Jesus speaks to us today, this first day of this new year?

You might say that Advent, the season that begins the church year, is a **liminal space** - a place of 'already' and 'not yet'; a *threshold* season; the "messy-muddy-middle" between what is, what was, and what will be.

It strikes me that Messiah Lutheran Church has been in a liminal season for quite some time. I think we've been feeling it rather acutely since the start of construction up on Brewery Hill, and moving here to Calvary. But even before then, with movement around "building" beginning to stir nearly 20 years ago, and the departure of those families that first kindled those dreams and visions since then. Even with that building taking shape today, this liminal season for us promises to continue long after it's done. We have been in transition, and will continue to be long after we walk through those beautiful new doors. It is a liminal time for this congregation, even as we look with hope at the start of this new year to the joy of what is coming.

Susan Beaumont, a church consultant, wrote a book in 2019 about how to face the challenges of leading in the Church during this "liminal age." At one point she speaks of liminal space as "thin": She writes,

The Celtic Christian tradition teaches us about thin places. A thin place is where the material realm is only thinly separated from the spiritual; where the eternal is seeping through the physical; where shafts of divine light penetrate the thin veil that divides heaven from earth.

Liminal seasons are thin places, where the presence of the divine is palpable. Liminal seasons are ripe opportunities for communities of faith to **deepen their practices of group discernment, to watch for the movement of God.**

(Beaumont 16)

Does that sound anything like Advent to you? In the book, she is clear about how difficult it is to be in liminality - how anxiety rises and we seek the stability of before, or to move more quickly to what will be. But she is clear too about the richness of what lingering in liminality can yield - truly, the transformative power of being in such a thin place as this.

Advent has begun and our anticipation rises with it. We see the day for which we await, but there is another day that we know not when it will arrive, or what it will be “like” when it does. In the midst of this unknowing, at the start of this dark season, Psalm 122 sheds the light I need to see the path Jesus invites us to walk.

The psalmist is speaking to the city, with words of prayer, praying for the peace of Jerusalem. “Peace be within your walls and quietness within your towers. For the sake of my kindred and companions, I pray for your prosperity.” These words speak to me of the quality with which we might walk in this time “in the light of the Lord.”

Jesus’ word to “Keep watch” comes to sound less-anxious. Can watchfulness be kept in peace and quietness, even in this season between now and what will be? What is it that we are to watch for? The coming of the Lord? The movement of God toward making the earth home? If we hear the psalmist as we might hear Jesus, praying for the prosperity of his kindred and companions, the question of what that prosperity might look like rises.

Even in the discomfort of liminality, even in the rabid pace of this season, Advent calls us to stillness and quiet - an alert, unharried watchfulness for what God is doing now and and what God is calling us to. In this season we learn to discern with quiet confidence, for the day of the Lord is coming.

AMEN