

December 9, 2018
2 Advent
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Ready or Not

It is the classic call from the game that many play as children. The rules are simple: one person covers their eyes and counts to 100, and everyone else runs and hides. Across the street, behind the house, up a tree, or anywhere else creative. At the end of the counting, the call goes out for all to hear: "Ready or not, here I come."

That is how we are likely to feel this time of year. The shorter days and the earlier and longer nights, all that is happening around us, sets the stage. To wait. To prepare. Ready or not, the baby Jesus shows up again each year in Christmas pageants here at Christ Church and around world. Ready or not, the holy days will be upon us.

And then there are the parts of life we can never be ready for. We know them well. Losing a job. Getting rejected, turned down or passed over. A disruption. A diagnosis. Growing older and less steady. Having a harder time putting names to faces and remembering something or someone that was once very familiar. Growing distant from friends who have moved away. The unexpected can happen like a thief in the night. Advent reminds us of all of this.

Of the many lessons I have learned over my life -- and continue to learn -- is what I've been told when something I cared about fails to happen, or falls apart, drifts way. or crashes and burns. Those dispensers of wisdom did not go for the off-hand and easy "I told you so" or "I would have done that differently" responses. But something more to the heart of the matter. They were more likely to say: "what did you expect."

What did I expect? What do we expect? That every effort will succeed? Each idea is a good one? That life is fair and easy. That we would never make a mistake? -- sometimes for all the world to see. That someone we had once trusted could betray that trust? That the life that we had imagined would not unfold according to plan.

This season is about waiting and expecting something to happen.

To understand the power and the meaning of Jesus coming into the world we look back at the message the people of Israel had heard for centuries from a God had led them from slavery into the Promised Land, into exile and back again -- never letting them forget who they were and whose they were. To the people of Israel, who had been separated, dispersed and lived in exile under foreign rule, the word arrives: it was almost over. God was acting yet again in the events of the world and they would be returning home.

There are few things more powerful than evoking the idea and place of home. Consider the questions we are often asked: Where did you grow up? Where are you from? Where is

home for you? The poet Robert Frost wrote, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

The prophet Malachi 3. V. 3 "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple." Christians draw a line from these ancient words to coming of Christ.

In the gospel from Luke, we hear the words of another prophet, Isaiah, taking on new life in the work of John the Baptist. "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth."

Prepare the way of the Lord – the call of Advent.

People of a certain age and musical taste might remember the singer songwriter John Mayer's song from the year 2006 "Waiting on the World to Change." In it he sang:

"Now we see everything that's going wrong
With the world and those who lead it
We just feel like we don't have the means
To rise above and beat it

It's hard to beat the system
When we're standing at a distance

Now if we had the power
To bring our neighbors home from war
They would have never missed a Christmas
No more ribbons on their door

It's not that we don't care
We just know that the fight ain't fair
So we keep on waiting (waiting)
Waiting on the world to change"

Set those lyrics next to the Gospel and we see how they come up short.

When John waded into the Jordon and immersed the people in the water, he was saying that the change that the world was waiting for began in the lives of each person who heard the call of a new way of living life and stepped forward. He called people to change the way they were living and thinking and to accept the forgiveness that God was waiting to offer them.

What this means for you and me is that we cannot just kick back and passively wait for the Lord to come for the world to change.

One of the core understandings of our faith is that we believe in a God who is not just “far off” and “out there” – the great designer of the Big Bang that put the universe into motion – but that God is close. Here and now. Who is, was and will be. We are much more than God’s science project and laboratory. God is invested in this world and in us. In response we are agents, we are instruments, and we are participants in the life God gives.

This may be as important to remind ourselves more than ever. At times I fear that many of today are losing the sense of our agency. “It” – whatever we define that “it” as, it just too big and depressing and confusing and scary that one person could never impact change or make a difference or shape an outcome. If that is the posture and response, then people are likely to retreat, hide, deny reality and truth, numb the pain, and never hear and accept the full invitation that God is making to us.

The prophet speaks of valleys, mountains, crooked and rough ways.

These valleys – these gaps between those who have and those have little – will not filled magically. The mountains and challenges that people face each day will not be leveled or overcome without a hard look at how these obstacles came about to begin with. It cannot be said enough: the families who slept in our classrooms this past week are trying mightily to left themselves out of holes and overcome challenges to get back up on their feet. With God’s help, and with our involvement as a parish, they may just well do it.

The rough places and the dead-ends are often the places where God shows up most.

Lastly; let us also pay attention to our inner lives – that part of us unseen by others but known to the One who made us. If God’s spirit is truly within us, then the searching inward, the tending of our own soul, sitting in quiet, can make all the difference. Making us more calm than anxious, more trusting than fearful, more hopeful than pessimistic.

To borrow a recent and sometimes maligned political campaign slogan, this season and the Gospel is truly all about “hope and change.” Filling in gaps, overcoming challenges, softening rough edges and navigating our way through life is the work we share.

The last line of John Mayer’s hit song end like this: “And we’re still waiting (waiting).” The world will change when, with God’s help, we do.