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1 Advent, Year A
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What to Expect When Expecting

Each year, we pray our way into Advent using the images and language of Paul's words to the Romans. We ask God to give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. What you and I will need to decide as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ at Christmas is what things are we going to cast away and set aside that cloud out what is good and right and life-giving, and what practices and actions can we "try on" -- like a person tries on a new coat for the winter -- to shield us and reinforce us with what only God can give. We have work to do in these days and weeks before carols are sung and the pageant characters take center stage. So, let us begin.

To be a person of faith is to be someone who remembers. You will hear me return to this idea often in my preaching. It draws from the dominant message throughout the Bible: remember. Remember Israel who led you out of Egypt. Remember: I am your God, you are my people. Our weekly meal we call the Eucharist, that feeds us with grace for the journey and includes us in this mystical body we call the Church, began with these simple words: do this in remembrance of me.

Remembering is a way to learn and grow and move forward through the darkness and the light.

Which makes it hard is when memories fail and we forget, willingly or clinically, by neglect or decline. Hearts can harden if we forget or cannot imagine what it feels like to be the outcast or the outsider, the new arrival, the ignored, the bullied. If one does not remember or fails to imagine what it is like to be small or forgotten, it makes it easier for the same person to exclude, reject, shun or bully others -- all the things we know to be opposite of what the gospels teach.

It is no accident that many Jewish groups in this country are at the forefront of the advocacy and response to the refugee crisis and immigration debate -- for in their not so distant memories they and their families were the ones fleeing persecution and being turned away from far too many places of sanctuary. Two words accompany any Holocaust remembrance ceremony or museum: Never forget.

Why begin this season with an inventory of memory?

We know that Advent and Christmas are highly charged in the memory department. The soundtrack and scent of the season is one of nostalgia. Its pull is powerful, yet its impact is complicated.

Looking at our lives, there are some events we simply cannot remember. Taking our first steps – too far back. Those first steps always seem to be a significant milestone for those who hover over toddlers – somethings causing major guilt pangs if one parent is not present for that one small step.

A question I have asked myself and others goes like this: Would you if you could, go back and live your life again? There are no magic powers that come with living your life again – you cannot change identities and history – the same life over again with the same decisions and outcomes? Would it be worth it? Could you bare it? Would a life do-over be a good thing or too painful?

It might be worth it – for the bright days and the better memories. But the deal would also come with the same hard times, the painful losses, the lonely periods and the unexpected – those moments would also be re-played and re-lived.

The readings we hear on the first Sunday of Advent prime us with a message of watchfulness and waiting. The mantra and refrain is “Keep awake.”

In the gospel reading from Matthew 24 Jesus is talking about a new age to come. In the verses that precede, he refers to the birth pangs of all of the things that will have to happen until that time – as if the world is going through a hard and extended labor process before something new and lasting appears and gets born.

I remember a book my wife Leslie and I were given before the birth of our first child. It is “the book” given to our generation of parents to be. I’m speaking of the classic “What to Expect When You're Expecting” by Heidi Murkoff, Arlene Eisenberg, Sandee Hathaway – the go-to guide to learn about things that long ago were simply passed on through extended families and village midwives. Inspired by the title of this book we have a perfect Advent question: what do we expect when expecting?

How does Jesus prepare those who would listen and keep their eyes open for a radically new way of living?

This “new thing” Jesus called the Kingdom of God. The shape of this new age should be somewhat familiar to our ears: a world turned upside-down, where the far off are brought new, the weak made strong, sinners are forgiven, and to lose something or give it away is the only way to hold onto what matters.

In the gospel for today, Jesus relies on the faith memories and points to Noah.

Even the most marginal religious person has probably heard of Noah, the animals and the arc because it a story that goes beyond church or tradition or tribe. The story has long captured our imaginations. Why did Jesus use the story of Noah’s time as a cautionary tale?

Let us go back to the beginning. In Genesis, not long after Adam and Eve, Cain killing his brother Abel, it was becoming clear to God that creation had veered off course. The wickedness and violence of humankind was the problem and God had major regrets.

Genesis 6:6 “The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth.” God got mad. Really mad. God promised to destroy the earth but he gave Noah, a blameless man, and his family a head’s start and a literal life boat out of the pending destruction. The arc was built in great detail, and the animals – two of every kind – were loaded in time for the 40 days and nights of rain. The flood came and days later the arc came to ground. This holy myth tells a story we need to hear.

Children connect with the brighter side of this story. The animals, the details of the arc construction, the rainbow signally that there would be no more floods of this scale. We skip over those small details of all those who were wiped away as one family survived.

Jesus was trying to make a connection with the people in his day. He pointed in the Noah story to the days before the rains fell. When there was still time to live differently and see beyond one’s inner circle. Genesis points out the violence – the earth was corrupted in God’s sight – and during that time life went on. Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.

Caught living ordinary lives, many were caught unaware when the rain started to fall. They did not find their way onto the life boat out of this pending disaster.

It’s hard to say if the world is much different than in Noah’s or Jesus’ day. There is still violence and wickedness and whole systems are corrupted by greed and neglect. The scale of human suffering is vast and hard to take in and respond to. The image of global flooding is not beyond the pale as the oceans warm that will cause epic losses in the years to come.

At the heart of the Christian story and message is that after a long period of time where nothing seemed to be getting through – kings, judges, and prophets came and went – somehow there was a need for creation-wide intervention of a different kind. The long-awaited messiah and savior would not be what the people were expecting. He would wash the feet of his friends and call upon us to love one another – even our enemies. The world would be turned upside down and inside out before it would be set right again.

The God we may want to intrude and shake up our own lives may do so in the ways we were not expecting.

Matthew 24: 42 “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” Let us not stick our heads in the sand, seemingly unaware or unconcerned about the state of our world. Do not look the other way when injustice is out in the open. Keeping awake means not falling asleep, it means keeping our eyes and ears open.

Paul, in our lesson from Romans, sounds a similar note. Romans 13:11-12 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For

salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.

Paul gives us clear operating instructions: Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

This for me is Advent's response to the Lenten discipline of giving something up and taking something one. Lay aside that which leads to nowhere good or positive. Fostering ill-will. Letting grudges linger.

Name the darkness that intrudes and interrupts. Name the thoughts and impulses that disturb you. Naming things for me is one way to keep them in check and at bay because now I can see and recognize them. A simple question such as: what is bothering you, what is weighing on your heart can invite some needed soul searching and soul mending.

Lay darkness and heaviness aside for a time. Put on what you could call your armor. What protects you for unfounded meanness and pettiness, what shields you from what you cannot control? What are we expecting to happen when we are expecting God to come into the world and in our lives in new ways?

And so, Advent begins.