

That Stubborn Hope - Advent 1 -Year C 2024  
The Rev. Emily E. Given - Church of the Messiah, Gwynedd

*Please note: This text are my sermon notes and note a full, formal manuscript.*

I grew up in a home where the tree didn't go up until Christmas Eve. When my brother (John) and I were little, we went straight to bed after the late-late candlelight service and woke up to a fully transformed living room. It wasn't because my parents were big into Santa but because they were big into Advent waiting. As we grew older, the veil was lifted just a little and we would decorate the tree together between the services but still, it was a Christmas Eve affair.

Now that I am older, I appreciate how they pushed back against the Christmas busyness all around us. How they were, what the Gospel writer John would say, IN the world but not OF the world. I took photos with Santa in the little house on the town green just like all the other families, danced numerous roles in the regional Nutcracker ballet year after year, and still, I knew the real deal was climbing into the car to head to church to watch as a candle was added each week on the Advent wreath. The candles were the way I kept time during the season. The surprising thrill of lighting the pink candle when it was time. What I called in the Saturday letter this week, "the holy seventh inning stretch" of Advent, is to pause from the waiting and party just a little. To be filled with JOY.

As someone who does not like delayed gratification, it always surprises me how much I love Advent. A word which means, "coming". The Adventus. The time when we focus on how God is doing a new thing - again. How Jesus is being born into our lives afresh each year. That the rhythm of birth, life, and death is natural.

This year, we hear it from the perspective of Luke. His distinctive viewpoint shapes our Advent waiting. While his writing style is more formal and focuses on "just the facts, ma'am," there is great hope in what he communicates. We have signs and symbols... the earth will do unpredictable things... the continued narrative that the world around us will not always be at peace but there is always more. The first week of Advent focuses on hope because it is the basis of our life in God, through Jesus. The world might be shaken to its very foundation, yet "the Son of Man" did come... IS coming... and will CONTINUE to come with "power and great glory." The invitation is to stand up, raise our hands, and know our redemption is near. Not necessarily chronologically, but relationally. Jesus, our redeemer, is with us. He pulled these words from his own faith tradition. Jesus quoted one of the major prophets from the Hebrew scriptures, Daniel. Daniel, who also wrote through an apocalyptic lens, focused on the faithfulness of God, no matter what is "cooking" around us. He also didn't mince his word - when people (or nations) don't stay focused on God, things start to fall apart.

So today, we can hear the warnings of prophets like Daniel and Jeremiah and know that "while the days are surely coming when promises will be fulfilled," it is not a reason to be afraid. This return of Jesus is not just one final, cataclysmic end. The coming of

Jesus is a daily way of sensing the presence of the divine and leaning into it. It is the invitation to live with purpose. Since this is not an easy concept to understand, Jesus did what Jesus does best -He tells a story... a parable... a simple story that communicated a larger truth. A story that places two things next to one another so we can see. Look at the trees... their buds send a message. The green growth of their branches tells us “what time it is.” Everything around us will come and go, but what remains forever is the Word of God...the promise of God... the HOPE of God. That is what will never change or will never pass away.

The writing of Parker Palmer, a modern theologian and educator who the Quakers have deeply influenced, speaks to this. He suggests that how we respond to contradiction is pivotal to our spiritual lives. Advent is the season when we prepare for the ultimate paradox - a God who is fully human and fully divine. The holy “both/and” is how God is present to us. This contradiction gives voice to a beautiful and nearly unexplainable truth of the mystery of God’s hope manifested in the world.

Two things CAN be true at the same time. It is the holy paradox of perfect love in our imperfect world.

So, what is the paradox in your life this Advent season? How might two things be true in your world, yet you cannot wrap your mind around them? How might you allow Jesus to enter that holy mystery and bring HOPE ..and light? What is the holy “both/and” brewing within you that you want to offer up?

Where is the intersection of joy and heartbreak?  
 What do you know to be true and yet makes no real sense at the same time?  
 Let God meet you there.

It is the opportunity to know Jesus more intimately in the “already and not yet” of his continual coming again into our lives.

Advent waiting is not sitting idly. It is pregnant with the anticipation of new life within us. That is why my friend and fellow priest, Mark Bozutti-Jones calls the “womb of Advent”.

The poet and pastor Jan Richardson wrote, “I am finding hope to be a curiously stubborn creature.” when she wrote the “Blessing of Hope.”

“So may we know  
 the hope  
 that is not just  
 for someday  
 but for this day—  
 here, now,  
 in this moment  
 that opens to us:  
 hope not made

of wishes  
but of substance,  
hope made of sinew  
and muscle  
and bone,  
hope that has breath  
and a beating heart,  
hope that will not  
keep quiet  
and be polite,  
hope that knows  
how to holler  
when it is called for,  
hope that knows  
how to sing  
when there seems  
little cause,  
hope that raises us  
from the dead—  
not someday  
but this day,  
every day,  
again and  
again and  
again.”

That is my prayer for us this Advent - that we might know a hope that is curiously stubborn in its inability to let go of us.

That we might have hope that hollers... and rejoices... that knows the groundedness of being in the world but not of the world.

A hope that keeps pointing us to the source of it all - the “Holy Both/And” of our fully human/fully divine savior Jesus. Again... and again... and again.

*Amen.*