

First Sunday of Advent, Year B, December 3, 2023
Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18;
1 Corinthians 1: 3-9; Matthew 13:24-37
St. Matthew's, Sunbury; The Reverend Dina Carter Ishler,
Priest in Charge

“And what I say to you I say to all: keep awake.”

In the name of God~ Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Amen.

I want to draw your attention to our inside bulletin cover, where I always provide some information to help us learn a little more about the season of the church year we are in or the feast day we are celebrating. I get this practice from Mother Barbara of St. Andrew's, Shippensburg, who as you know was the preacher at my ordination and has had a tremendous influence on me as a mentor and a soul friend. When I was re-reading today's bulletin, I realized there was formation on this page I wanted to focus on, and so it is the heart of our conversation today.

The season of Advent invites us to live within the tension of that ‘both/and’ way of being so dear to our Anglican tradition- as we talked about last week, this is an invitation to hold space for more than one kind of truth and draw lifegiving wisdom from both. Our Advent journeys beckon us to turn our eyes toward the horizon- as we await the birth of our Savior we also seek the Christ who will come again AND we focus our attention on the present time, where the kingdom of God is already stirring. Advent is a time of prayer and preparation, as the invitation for lighting our Advent wreath says- a liminal space where we are called to attend to the past, the present, and the future, all at once. If we are open to the prophetic wisdom that teaches us how the God of the ages has always been at work, we will be able to recognize the Christ when he returns in the fullness of time, even as we attend to the here and now work of the kingdom on earth.

Advent is a season whose treasured imagery and hymns and stories remind us of all who kept this watch before us, of expectation that our Advent journeys will also prepare us for the birth of our infant Savior- Immanuel, God with us, who will live and die as we do to be joined with us forever in our human experience- in sorrow and rejoicing, in grief and in hope, before returning to draw all people to himself. The yearly rhythm of how we honor this season touches something deep within us that is necessary to how we live into its truth. We light candles in the quiet dusk of winter evenings to symbolize the Light which will be born among us and drive away darkness forever, we tell and act out the stories whose familiar and beloved characters have walked the road ahead of us, and we invite ancient practices of prayer and silence to prepare our own souls to carry and birth this Light so that all might know it more fully. We do this alongside a secular world who has raced ahead to the joy and wonder of a baby in a stable,

surrounded by shepherds and friendly beasts and all the heavenly host singing their Glorias- not to mention mall Santas and Christmas displays right after Thanksgiving and our race to finish decorating and baking and gift-buying. Staying fully present, lingering in the mystery of this season so that our wonder and amazement at the Incarnation will not be lost in all the hecticness and hustle is a challenge, and figuring it out is spiritual work. We have things to do, though, while we watch and wait, for each of us have been called to share in preparing the way- **not only** for our yearly remembrance of when God was born among us in all the vulnerability and fragility of being human, **but also** for when “we will see the Son of Man will come in clouds with great power and glory and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven”, as it says in today’s Gospel. **Maybe** this is why the Gospel writer Mark is insisting we need to keep alert- to stay awake- so we do not miss either

the Nativity or when Christ comes again- both clearly foretold in the Advent message.

It can be hard to remember, because the gentle and lovely traditions of Advent and Christmas are so cherished and well-known, but Advent should be preparing us for a new way of being *where nothing will look like we expect it to look...where God will be found everywhere but the 'usual' places where we expect to find God*. Today's Gospel reading for this first Sunday of Advent, unexpected and startling as it can feel to us with its apocalyptic description of the physical world passing away and the glorious coming of the Son of Man, follows closely on the heels of Mark's description of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and all the persecutions and false prophecies that will be the hallmarks of this era. For Mark, God is most fully God not in the wondrous beauty of the temple which no longer exists- that building which was the center of religious

power and authority- but outside the city walls, in the wilderness, on the Cross. Mark's emphasis on "Keep awake- keep alert" is because we need constant vigilance and discernment as to what truly is of God and what is not, so that we might know God when all around us is what looks like devastation and defeat but is actually victory and the fullness of God's presence- where out of suffering and death will come new life and out of darkness, light. *The innocence of that birth in a humble stable is only the beginning of what should command all our attention.*

Beloveds, once we have known it, we cannot go backwards from the Incarnation- that in-breaking of the reign of God into our human existence- as if it never happened, or maybe happened sweetly and peacefully like our favorite pastoral images of the nativity scene, those ones you see on Christmas cards. God coming to live among us as one of us- calling us to share in the work of

building the coming kingdom- is an event that shook the universe to its very foundations *and it cannot be undone- we can never go back to the way things were before.*

Never again will human beings live free from the knowledge that we have been called to share in God's mission, as overwhelming as this might feel, as dangerous as kingdom-building can be. We can ignore the call, pretend we are doing it when really we are hiding from the hardness of it and praying we will not be noticed- but none of that will protect us from what we know we must do: to live *"so in that last day"*, as our Collect says, *"when Christ shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal."* And *"Beware, keep alert"*, says today's Gospel, *"for you do not know when the time will come."* **Here** is the 'both/and' that will demand all our best efforts- we must prepare for the coming of Christ as if it could be any minute- after all, we do not know when the master of the house will come- about that day or hour no

one knows except the Father- AND we must settle in, stay watchful, prepare for the long haul as we do the work of the kingdom here on earth. These two ways of being are much more connected than we sometimes take the time to realize.

In C.S. Lewis' beloved book The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, when the four children are in Narnia, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver try to describe Aslan- the Lion who is the Christ-like figure in this series- to them. When the children say they feel scared to meet a real lion, Susan asks "Is he quite safe?" Mr. Beaver responds: "Safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Would we too prefer a safe God, a tame God, like the One we find swaddled and sleeping in his mother's arms? Probably. Is God equally likely to show up in the unexpected, the uncomfortable, maybe even the most

frightening spaces of our lives? Absolutely. *Either way, all separation from God is gone forever and here we are in both the brokenness and beauty of this world- building the kingdom that is to come with courage and hope. Beloveds, we know this is true.*

Wherever you find God this Advent season, stay awake- the kingdom is at hand and we have work to do.
Amen.