

ADVENT I

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. Mark 13:33

We have just begun Advent by lighting one candle in the midst of all the darkness in our lives and in the world. It symbolizes our longing, our desire, our hope. And what do we hope for? What do we wait for? Are we following Jesus' admonition to keep alert for signs of the approaching realm of God?

Perhaps we want to be reminded that Jesus came to save the world from sin and death. Perhaps we want to experience Christ's coming to us now, in our everyday lives, to help us live our lives with meaning and purpose. And perhaps we want to prepare for Jesus coming to meet us in the future, through the span of our lives?

But in the midst of all the crazy holiday bustle, how do we get in touch with the holy longings within us? What does it mean to prepare to celebrate the Christ's coming 2,000 years ago? How can we prepare to experience that coming into our lives this year? What does it mean for us now, with our world involved in so much conflict? How are we being invited to trust more deeply? How much more do we long for Jesus coming to us, in the midst of the darkness in our world? In what ways can we renew our lives so we might be prepared to greet Christ when Christ comes again?

These are hard questions, complicated, deep questions. How do we find time or space to contemplate them? And do we even want to? Do we dare to examine our deep spiritual yearnings, the *hopes and fears of all our years*? Do we dare to imagine that, in the words of the lovely carol, those hopes and fears will indeed be *met here* on the most holy night we are awaiting?

At our discernment day two weeks ago, we talked great deal about the community we all love, the open, welcoming, accepting character of St. John's, and the deep friendships we have formed. But we talked also about our spiritual life together, and the desire to deepen and expand that life. And indeed, it must have been something special, something beyond the desire for friendship or companionship that brought us all here in the first place.

Why church, after all? Why God? As one of my tablemates said, talking about our choice to be here, "We are freaks, after all! We who go to church! Who dare to call ourselves Christian?"

Freaks, indeed. Why church? Why not brunch at VeeVee's or Doyle's, a leisurely perusal of the Sunday papers?

What if this Advent, we ponder our deep and holy longings, the longings that brought us here and, I pray, that keep us here. What if we allow ourselves to imagine a life that is different? What if our hearts were at peace and our lives more satisfying? What if that longing in the most hidden corners of our hearts is something holy, a holy longing, a desire for a deeper relationship with God.?

Advent is a time to recognize both our holy longing and the healing love God has for us, despite the many barriers we put up between ourselves and God.

Easy for me to say, but how to put this recognition into practice? Because our lives are so busy, so filled with dailiness, and filled at this time of year as well with all the extras: parties, shopping, holiday insanity.

Here are a few gentle suggestions. To begin to open our hearts more fully we need time. Just a little time to begin. Start tentatively, experimentally, as you would beginning or deepening any friendship. Start simply and just before you get out of beds in the mornings, take a minute to open your hands and pray "Come Jesus!" And rest just a moment with that prayer, that invitation.

But if that's too much *Jesus*, try something else. Read the daily meditation on our website. Read a psalm. Whatever works for you. The most important thing is that moment of remembrance, that pause to let God into your heart, just a little at first. And then, perhaps, throughout the day, that moment will come back to you, will bring you back to the deep hope at the center of your life.

If we let ourselves feel what is in our hearts, we know they are filled with love. We can carry that experience with us as we go through even the busiest of our days. God waits with infinite love and with arms outstretched to meet us.

God waits, and we wait with God this Holy Advent. Amen