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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Advent 1/C
Jeremiah 33:14-16
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.**

Amen.

Now the days are short. The darkness comes early. It looks as if the light is just about to go out.

Right at this time, when the light seems to be coming to an end, the beginning is near.

Because long ago the church decided to take time and do something new with it.

Most of the time, we think of time as a line – beginning somewhere in the past and marching forward, always forward.

But the church in her wisdom long ago took the ends of that line – *or perhaps they are beginnings?* – and tied them together to make a circle.

Now we know that for every beginning there is an ending, and for every ending there is a beginning. Advent is our beginning.

The Church learned a long time ago that people need a way to get ready to enter, or even come close, to a Mystery like Christmas. And so four weeks were set aside to get ready. This is such a great mystery it takes that long to get ready.

And so today we begin again, beginning with the lighting of a candle.

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For centuries people performed rituals to ease their way through winter as they longed for the sun's rebirth.¹

The ancients, who feared the waning of the light, had a way to woo back hope: they knew not to separate what happened outside them in nature from what happened inside, spiritually. With colder, shorter days, they felt even more anxiety than we do.

Their solution was to halt routine. When the sun stopped, they stopped. With the harvest in, they put away their tools. They removed wheels from their wagons, decorated them with greens, and hung them indoors.

The wheels became signs of a different time, a time to stop ordinary things, huddle together, and turn inward. These people confronted their feelings of cold, fear, and loss. With their wheels lit with candles, they prayed for the wheel of the earth to turn again toward the sun.

And light did follow darkness. Mornings came earlier. People recovered hope when they stopped and waited and faced up to the winter of their longing. They shared in God's miracle of light.

¹ This section on history of the Advent wreath adapted from a sermon by The Rev. Ted Jones.

God works in these symbols with us, too. Symbols are thick with meaning and point us toward powerful truths. The wreath, that we light is our symbol of hope in this season of anticipation, helps us to get ready to come close to the approaching mystery.

We make and use these wreaths because they help us to slow down and pause. They invite us into setting aside time, alone or together, to sink into the practice of waiting.

That is what these four weeks of Advent are for after all – waiting for the coming of Christ, both with the birth of a baby and in expectation of Christ's return.

Our Gospel today points us toward the latter. If you came today humming a Christmas carol and ready for some warm fuzzy baby Jesus, we're not there yet.

Instead we get frightening, bold, and beautiful glimpses of God.²

God promises faithfulness from the first, and God's promises are sure. A righteous branch will spring from Jesse's tree, a descendent of David, who will execute justice and righteousness.

This is who we, as Christians, have come to know as Emmanuel – *God with us*. The hope for the one born in Bethlehem, then, is also the hope for the one who will bring God's mission of justice, compassion, and reconciliation to its fullness here on earth – making paths straight, separating the wheat from the chaff, casting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly.

² Kathy Beach-Verhey, Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*.

How is it that we wait with hope for the one who comes then?

Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote that Christian hope is not an “opium of the beyond,” but rather the divine power that makes us alive in this world.³

Alive in this world, and taking time to pause for contemplation, repentance, and anticipation. Remembering those times in our life when we have been filled with longing for what is to come, yet unable to hurry it.

Do you know that feeling? Now is the time to sink into it as we live into the understanding that Christian discipleship is a kind of *living in between* – aware of Jesus, waiting for Jesus, and coming to know this Jesus for whom we wait in the midst of an eventful, unpredictable, and even tumultuous world.⁴

We, like our first-century sisters and brothers, need to wait by being watchful and alert, prayerful and humble, trusting in God and awaiting redemption from the world’s systems that only God can, and will, bring at the end of days.⁵

Which, will of course, be another beginning.

We know this rhythm, just as our ancestors did.

*Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.*⁶

³ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*.

⁴ Wesley D. Avram, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*.

⁵ Mariam J. Kamell, Exegetical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*.

⁶ Luke 21:29b-30, NRSV.

The new leaves of spring are a symbol of the circle of the seasons, rebirth, and life. We will come to that at Easter.

But for now, our sign and symbol are with the winter branches cut and made into a wreath, adorned with candles.

Whether an Advent wreath has deep roots in your spiritual life or this is your first year making and using one, I invite you to use it to ground this time of waiting we have entered. Use it to help you get ready.

When you light your Advent wreath, turn off other lights first and see how dark is. Pay attention to the darkness growing each day as we approach Christmas, Pay attention to the light growing each week as we light another candle.

Sink into the grace of building a spiritual discipline for this season, waiting in hope for the one we call *God with us*.

~ AMEN ~