

**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.**

Everything has changed again – we're now surrounded by blue! Happy New Year everyone, as we begin the season of Advent today.

Every year as we enter Advent, I am struck by how counter-cultural a season it really is.

As the world around us is ramping up into a holly-jolly fervor, our Gospel reading is about signs in the moon and stars – distress among the nations – fear and foreboding. It's not what one might consider "festive."

Our reading today from chapter 21 in the Gospel of Luke is Jesus' final teaching before the events of his passion, a kind of farewell discourse to his friends. It is what we call Apocalyptic literature¹ – from the Greek word *apokalupsis* meaning 'uncovering' or 'revealing.'

The image it evokes is that of God pulling aside the veil and revealing to God's people a deliverance to come – and typically includes cryptic language, ominous signs, and anguish followed by victory.

It is an extravagant, evocative, vision of **hope** when all hope seems lost.

¹ Notes on Apocalyptic literature adapted from: Salt Project Lectionary Commentary, <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/advent-week-one-lectionary-commentary>.

The essence of apocalypse, the point of what is ‘revealed,’ is that God is on the way, turning the world around – and because of this, we should all be watchful and alert in the days and weeks ahead, cultivating a mindful attentiveness to signs of **hope** and wonder.

This is the heart of Advent, for all that it is wrapped up in shadows.

A season of encroaching darkness when we are invited to intentionally pay attention – to watch and wait – when we steadily light more candles each week in anticipation of the Light of God coming into this world.

That light is both the birth of Christ we celebrate at Christmas, right after the winter solstice when sunlight slowly begins to return, and also the coming again of Christ, the dawn we are bid to look for with both our eyes and our hearts.

But there is more – the Light of God cannot be so easily contained, even as a symbol

Twelfth-century abbot and theologian Bernard of Clairvaux wrote about “three Advents.”²

The first was the incarnation, the Advent at Christmas when God became flesh and dwelled among us.

The third and last will be the Parousia, the second coming of Christ, the Advent at the end of the age (and the subject of today’s Gospel passage).

² Salt Project Lectionary Commentary, <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/advent-week-one-lectionary-commentary>.

The second, or middle Advent, is the one between these two – **the everyday arrival of Jesus**: the knock at the door or the ping of a text message, the still small voice at 2:00 in the morning, the grieving friend, the hungry child, those lost in addiction – the list goes on and on – Jesus comes again and again like a thousand spring buds on a fig tree that appeared dead in the winter.³

And so, as much as this season is about preparing for Christmas – or even counter-culturally the return of Christ in judgment – it is really about keeping alert to the Advent of Christ around us daily.

We do this by spreading the light of **hope** through doing the work God has given us to do: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit those in prison.⁴

Which might look like: answering the door or the text message, attending to the still small voice in the middle of the night, being present with the grieving friend, giving food to the food pantry year round (because the need is always there), responding with compassion to those fighting battles we cannot always see or imagine...

It is all about **hope**.

And turns that that paying attention, waiting, and watching are not passive endeavors – but instead require our action – answering, feeding, listening, welcoming, giving, responding...

And maybe also lighting a candle on our Advent wreath, bringing a gift for the angel tree, or pulling back the veil of despair for someone in need – shining the light of **hope** into their life.

³ Salt Project Lectionary Commentary, <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/advent-week-one-lectionary-commentary>.

⁴ Matthew 25:31-46.

Hope is a verb – so stay alert to where it is needed most, and share it freely.

~ AMEN ~