

“...beacons of hope!”
Advent 1 – Year B
Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
November 30, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

Day is done, gone the sun, but we need not fear. Darkness comes that we may see the stars and know that God is near.

That lullaby by Nancy Honeytree is one I used to sing to our babies when they were little and fussy. It always seemed to me that sunset was a time when they would fuss a little – as if they had finally become accustomed to daylight and now it was disappearing and they didn’t know what to do. So we’d hold them a little closer, soothe them with a song, and point out the moon and the stars to show them that even in the darkness there was still light – little glittering beacons of hope – and that day or night, God is near.

Advent is the season of hope – one little candle burning in the darkness this first Sunday of our new church year. Frankly, we could all use a little hope right now. The last Christians in Syria have apparently abandoned their homes and become refugees – one of the oldest communities of Christians in the world, the only ones who still spoke Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke at home and with His countrymen when He walked this earth. Now they are part of the millions of war refugees – oppressed and homeless. Yes, they are victims of ISIS. In fact the ISIS leaders in the area have moved into the homes of the Christians and taken them over. But Christians have been equally cruel to one another. In 1572 the King of France under the influence of his mother, Catherine de Medici, targeted the French Huguenots – Protestants – many of them Lutherans. Tens of thousands of these Lutheran Christians were slaughtered in the streets. It was all the rage, in those days, for the Reformers to take Latin names. My brothers each had a roommate in college whose family were French Huguenot Lutherans named Avelallament, which means “Hail to the Germans!” They hailed them for proclaiming the Gospel of grace – salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone. It humbles me to ask myself if I’d be willing to die for being identified with the Gospel as they did. Or if I’d be willing to be persecuted for seeking justice.

Here in our own country the scab has been pulled from the festering sore of racism as the ugly side of our “land of the free” has been exposed. I wept, like many, after the Ferguson announcement because after cowering in a riot torn Milwaukee as a 13 year old and then working against racism for nearly 50 years thereafter the basic issues seem largely unchanged. How long, O Lord, how long until justice reigns is a theme that echoes through the readings of Advent.

Our lessons from Isaiah and Mark are not, at first blush, about lullabies and quieting fears though they are grounded in hope. Isaiah wants the stars of the heavens to be torn open to reveal the glory and power of God – the mountains quaking so that God’s name would be made known to God’s adversaries and all the nations might tremble at God’s presence and know the justice of God.

The scene described is powerful but Isaiah doesn’t seem afraid – rather he hopes in God’s revealed nature of faithful love. Listen to how he speaks of God... “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.” For those gladly in God’s presence there need be no fear.

The Gospel is full of warnings cries of destruction commanding us to watch, and wait – always at the ready, always prepared knowing, trusting that our God, as Isaiah tells us, is “working for us” – active on our behalf as we wait, watch – and live our lives fully and faithfully at work in God’s Kingdom. That is what Advent reminds us of – waiting expectantly, waiting in hope as the days, months, years pass and circle back through the events with which we mark our time.

In northern climates like ours when the harvest was over and the snows were about to fall the wagons were put up on blocks and the wheels were taken off to give them a rest (it’s hard work to make a wagon wheel of wood and iron and unless it turns it could get flat like a tire and bump, bump, bump all through the next summer and even fall apart sooner). To get around the people had to use lighter sleighs with runners. So wheels were shed and runners were put on lighter weight vehicles.

Imagine the wheels just sitting around. As ever the circular shape of the wheel reminded people - Christian people especially of God and eternity – no beginning and no end, it also reminded them of the constant cycle of life – season following season, feasts and festivals lined up to give focus and keep life moving forward so sometime in the middle ages some Christian women and men looked at the wagon wheels lying on their sides, and as the days grew shorter and shorter and they looked to their Christmas and these creative Christians with time and wheels on their hands took the wagon wheel and twined evergreen branches through the spokes and around the edges making a wreath of new life that grew in light and brightness filling the sanctuaries with hope as the world got darker and darker but Christmas and the star of Epiphany were going to be celebrated.

Starting with readings from the prophets foretelling the coming of the Messiah the people prepared their hearts and minds for the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Magi. The first readings, like ours today, were full of warnings about the end times – encouragements to repent – to be ready – to be faithful – to be hopeful. Half way through the 4 weeks the candle color lightened to pink just to show you were half way through the time of preparation. Later that idea was tied in with angel readings and it was said the candle was pink because the angels “lightened the mood of repentance.” The wreath, completed with the Christ Candle at Christmas would blaze fully until the Epiphany – and then the newly baptized would be presented with a burning light as they were welcomed through the waters into the family of faith at the 1st Sunday after the Epiphany – the Baptism of our Lord.

That single light today is a “beacon of hope” - a reminder of Jesus, the Light of the World whose 1st arrival we shall soon celebrate and whose second arrival we await with great expectancy – while letting the light of faith God has given us shine out as a beacon of hope in the darkness of the world that surrounds us. This past week someone said to me that they were covering their ears to keep out the sounds of evil in the world. I admit the chaos and uncertainty at present has been almost too much to bear of late. But if you must stop your ears please keep your eyes open and look for those beacons of hope – look to the Light of the World and allow yourself to be drawn anew into the circle of faith and love – into the family of faith where you always have a home and someone to sit next to you, to walk with you through the bleak times in life. Coming together in worship is one place for us to see the people that are there for us but I’d like you to think of the thousands upon thousands of Advent wreaths being lit by Christians throughout the world in this season of waiting – people like you, following Jesus by faith – faith

sometimes strong, sometimes so faint it seems it's gone – but joined together in the Holy Spirit looking to that final arrival of Jesus when we will all go home to be with Him. That will be a day of rejoicing – rejoicing in our God who is faithful. The little lullaby I used to sing to our children ends with a promise about what that faithfulness means:

In the name of Jesus I sing this lullaby. In His name I say “goodnight” but never have to say “goodbye.”

AMEN

In this time of Advent waiting, stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection awaken us to the threatening dangers of our sins, keep us blameless until the coming of your new day, and grant us Your grace to share the light of faith in love and action.

AMEN