

St. Paul's Congregational Church
December 3, 2017; Isaiah 64:1-9 – Advent 1B
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It looks different in the sanctuary today, doesn't it. We're at the beginning of our journey through this new season - the Advent Wreath has been lit with the candle of hope. The trees are here – decorated with sparkling lights; we'll watch as those lights grow brighter and more numerous as we move toward the coming of the Light to us on Christmas.

We see the color blue on the paraments – the color of Advent. That tells a story too: think about that deep blue color of the clear, predawn sky –I suspect many of us are not looking at the sky at that hour – still asleep or too tired to notice it as we begin our days, begin our commute...it's really a beautiful color that covers us, covers the earth, in the dark, cold hours before the dawn. So we use that deep blue of Advent with the hint of expectation and anticipation of the dawn of Christ – it's meant to inspire us in the hope of faith, of expectation, and to encourage us to keep watch for the promised light of Christ to break over the horizon, changing night into day, darkness into light, and filling our lives with a holy and righteous splendor, washing away the darkness of dread and fear with the light of hope.

Today also marks the beginning of a new church year – and we take this time to reflect not only on times past, but also to celebrate another opportunity to start over. We look ahead, maybe making resolutions to make our lives healthier, happier, maybe even a bit simpler. And we'll do that as church too, I hope – here at St. Paul's to find the balance between the past and the future as we continue to discern our future ministry here in Nutley.

Advent can be a bittersweet time for us – amid the pressure to “make this the best Christmas ever”, we're called to look at this season differently – and that's always a challenge. Christians have always been called to be “in the world” but not “of the world” and I don't think there's any tougher time for us to live out this belief than in this season of the year when our highs are higher and our lows are lower.

There's no doubt that there's plenty to be concerned about, even frightened about these days – just as there was at the time of the writing of the Psalm and the passage from Isaiah - we watch the news, read the papers, talk with our colleagues – this week the reports of sexual misconduct in so many arenas of our society, the fighting about and the process of the tax reform bill in congress, the implications of dramatic changes to the tax code for all of us, the heightened threat of nuclear war, the ever present threat of terrorism, fear over the changes in the environment, widespread hunger and poverty – all of this weighs on us, doesn't it. This concern comes close to home, too, as we mourn the loss of loved ones, our own limitations, worry about what tomorrow will bring. We do live in the world, don't we – we're not exempt from the troubling times. We all know that deep blue of the night just before dawn.

But we know the darkness will be overcome - then the light begins to appear - advent is a season of hope – hope that we desperately yearn to feel, to believe in.

We also see how people respond in hope at this time of year: food collections, for instance, are up – our rooms upstairs are full of non perishable donations! The giving tree is up with gift requests of such simple things – a long tradition at this church and in many churches as well. And we also hear touching human interest stories mixed in with the terrible news that help us take heart – all is not lost. There is hope these dark days. There is good news to share.

Walking that line between despair and hope is always challenging - our hearts are filled with both aren't they. And aren't these words as good as any to describe the mood of our readings this morning. The Isaiah passage was written in the midst of, out of, the suffering of God's people. God's own people, Israel, are crying out, where are you God? Why don't you act to fix this awful situation? Why don't you come down and make things right? Where is God now? We ask those same questions!

And the gospel reading from Mark talks about darkness, suffering, even the powers in heaven will be shaken. We're cautioned to stay awake – to pay attention – to wait for the son of Man to come and gather the elect – from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

These readings are meant to call us up short in the midst of our celebrations. Advent – a time of waiting, of preparation, of expectation.

But, preparation for what? Expectation of what? I call on each of us to think about these questions in terms of our ministry here at St. Paul's: what are we preparing for? What do we expect of our ministry, the participation of our congregation, of ourselves – in nurturing our relationship with God – our discipleship – and living that out walking with our community, of sharing the good news? Where's our hope here? And hope is a verb – how are we living out our hope?

Maybe we're too comfortable in our lives to look for something better – our lives are pretty good here - unlike most of the rest of the world – we need to shake up our perspective, don't we. And maybe that's part of the blessing of Advent. It's during this season that our call to repentance is so loud: simply put – Advent is the time to turn back to God.

Advent is a call to regroup – to stop and take a breath. To stop and take a breath and remember who we are and whose we are. To stop and take a breath and focus on this season of Advent as a time of opportunity to look at what's truly important in our lives, individually and as church. To take a breath and refocus. To take a breath and wake up. To just stop and breathe. When's the last time you did that?

If you have a garden, you know well the cleanup activity that has to happen once the frost has come. After a busy growing season, it's time to prepare for the next spring, the new season – rake the leaves, maybe put down some more mulch, plant some bulbs and then let the garden rest and regroup, let the garden breathe. And so it is for us – our years find us dealing with more and faster change than ever before – we're left with what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance," a combination of fear, amazement, and disbelief – and I wonder if maybe that's exactly the gift Advent brings to each of us: a time to regroup, to attempt to make some sense of all that's happened and look to the challenges ahead and to look to God for those lasting answers.

Maybe one of those Advent challenges includes a deliberate effort to reconcile with our God and each other – to look to God as our only center, to hold on to each other in comfort and concern, worship together – because we are all on this journey together.

Advent is a time of looking ahead in expectation, in hope, in letting go and letting God be God. Because where there is reconciliation there is a restoration to wholeness. And isn't that what Jesus brings us – the possibility for wholeness, for reconciliation, for a whole new way of living – now and always. Let's use this season of advent to come together with God and each other in hope. Stay awake to the possibilities that surround us every day.

And of course, advent is also about the nearness of God, our hope to experience God right here, "down here" on earth through the Incarnation. God's radiance and power and love are here – can we allow ourselves to be moved by that? These advent texts from the Psalm, the Old Testament and the gospel of Mark speak of hopelessness, repentance, and doubt – hardly soft, "nice" passages – but we need to hear them. The darkness does in fact surround us, doesn't it – but the season of advent provides us a light, just like that first light of early dawn - however dim – pointing us to the call and promise that's there too: we are called to acknowledge that we are clay in the divine potter's hands, people ready to be molded anew as the work of God's hand. We have to stay awake and let go and let God!

Advent is a time of renewal – how would our lives change if we saw every one of our daily tasks, every one of our daily challenges, as sacraments – gifts that God freely give us which point to a greater reality that lies before us. What would change if we as God's people summon the courage and the spiritual strength to remember that the holy breaks into the daily all the time – this happens every day but we have to stay awake, pay attention, for this to transform us.

Preparation for the birth of Jesus is about repentance; it's about regrouping; taking a breath; it's about being an agent of reconciliation, of restoring, of renewing ourselves, our neighbors and families, our church, by letting God be God. By letting God intrude in our lives and calling us out of ourselves to take our part in bringing in God's realm. By expecting the unexpected – to face the challenges of the day in hope – hope in the knowledge that God is always with us, no matter how desperate the situation may seem. Let's get our priorities straight and live in the promise God makes to us: I am with you always, until the end of time. Keep awake and savor that promise! May your days be blessed. And may you be a blessing on all you meet. Amen.