

12.1.2024 Advent 1

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

“Watch, be alert, and pray”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The first Sunday of Advent always arrives as we enter the busiest time of the year. With Advent’s exhortations to “watch, be alert, and pray,” we may feel as if we just don’t have enough quiet time for prayer! And yet, this is what Jesus asks us to do!

On the first Sunday of Advent, we begin a new church year. Advent urges us to remember that we are walking with and waiting upon the God who sojourns with us in Jesus Christ. Prayerful contemplation is not a luxury; rather, prayer helps us meet the challenges of our busy lives and challenging times.

Jesus’ words in today’s gospel are not simply an apocalyptic vision about the future – his words describe our daily reality. Jesus says, “*There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.*” It is no overstatement to say that there is confusion and distress among the nations of the world today. Human beings are distressed by war in Europe and the Middle East. As a nation, we continue to be distressed and divided about many things. War and division reach deeply around the world touching the lives of many nations, including our own. On this first day of a new church year, Jesus’ words describe our acute human distress and confusion.

Jesus’ words about signs in the sun, moon, and stars also remind me of the many images we have seen of rockets and bombs that continually mar the daytime and nighttime sky. We have learned to even scar the beauty of the sky with a human-made apocalypse. Humanity doesn’t need to wait for a divine apocalypse, we see our own human-made destruction every day. Jesus’ words about feeling faint from fear and foreboding describe the emotional and spiritual distress of modern life that has robbed us of our spiritual unity with God and with our neighbor.

Yet Jesus says that when these things begin to take place, “*stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*” Jesus’ words are a call to look upward toward God. They are a call to look upward and beyond ourselves. Yet rather than looking upward, I think we spend much of our time looking down at the problems and tasks at hand right in front of us. On this first Sunday of Advent, the first day of a new church year, Jesus encourages us to look upward and believe. This is what faith is – to believe and look upward.

If you come to my office or look on the bulletin board in the hallway across from my office you will see the Japanese word for faith expressed in two characters and pronounced “*shinkō*” (信仰). This Japanese word for faith literally means “to believe and look upward.” That is what faith is: faith is to look upward outside of ourselves trusting that God is with us. On this first Sunday of Advent Jesus says, “*stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*” Believe and look upward for Christ is near to this world.

Advent doesn’t simply remind us to get ready for Christmas; rather, Advent’s themes are much larger than a one-day holiday. Advent reminds us to believe in the nearness of God throughout our lives. Advent reminds us to return to the fountain of faith, raise our heads, and watch because Christ is near to us. To be a Christian is to have one foot in the distress and worries of this world and the other standing squarely in God’s kingdom, confident that Christ is present with you.

In today’s reading from 1 Thessalonians, Paul prayed for something that the world is in dire need of today. Paul prayed that the Thessalonians might be unified in love for one another and for all people. And yet Paul could not have written these words had he not already been transformed by the grace of knowing Jesus Christ. We all know the story of a man named Saul whose encounter with Jesus changed him into the man named Paul. Rather than seeking unity with others, Saul had been hell-bent upon persecuting Christ and the church. Saul hated his enemies and sought to destroy all who opposed him. There are many “modern Sauls” in our world today who continue to hate and divide rather than seeking to love and unite humanity with God and with one another.

The transformation that Christ brought about in Paul is clear in today’s reading. In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul clearly seeks a unity of love with all people because only love makes it possible to stand blameless before God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Christians are indeed known by their love, because our love for one another and for all people is the way God works in this world. Only love brings about human unity that overcomes the distress and divisions dividing us, our communities, and this world.

At the end of today’s gospel, Jesus says, “*Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down...Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things...and to stand before the Son of Man.*” On this first day of a new church year, Jesus asks us to “watch, be alert, and pray,” yet prayer is the key that opens us to looking upward with faith. Prayer makes alert

as we watch and wait with Christ and our neighbor.

I might ask: How often do you pray? Do you begin or end your day with prayer? Do you allow prayer to frame your questions and worries? Do you take everything to God in prayer? Do you know the renewing power of prayer in your daily life?

Yet someone once said to me, “Pastor, I don’t think prayer has much effect on anything.” This person was describing the reality that our prayers do not often seem to yield much fruit. Saul’s old approach of hating and dividing seems much more expedient and effective. In answer to this person, I said, “I think understand what you mean about prayer, yet the truth is that we are impatient and unwilling to wait and listen for God.” In truth, we do not pray as we ought; we often seek the fulfillment of our own wills rather than seeking God’s will in our lives.

Yet I do believe that prayer has one great and often immediate effect – prayer changes the one who prays. Prayer changes us by lifting us upward into God’s presence that we might see the world and its people as God sees it. We realize we do not carry our burdens alone. As we pray not only for ourselves, prayer changes us so that we act with love for others, so that we work for unity among all people in this world.

This year, the Congregational Life Committee has again prepared Advent bags containing homemade cookies and an Advent devotional booklet. During Advent, use this booklet daily and allow prayer to renew and change you again.

Prayer is not a last resort when all else has failed; prayer is the starting line for all of life’s journeys. Prayer is not a retreat from the world; prayer empowers us to act with love for others in the world. Prayer helps us see reality more clearly – that God loves this world, even those we may find it difficult to love. Prayer moves us closer to those who are different from us.

Watch, be alert, and pray. Watch, and you will find ways to love others. Be alert, and you will see Christ in your neighbor. Pray, and you will realize that God’s love is overcoming the world’s divisions through you.

The advent of Christ continues in this world in you. Amen.