

“THERE WILL BE SIGNS”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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First Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 21:25-36

Every year, about this time, I start to get calendars in the mail. Do you? They come from organizations that are asking for money from me – hospitals, veterans organizations, foundations dealing with one disease or another. In order to entice me to give, they’ll send me something free. From these groups, I have received more address labels than I’ll ever be able to use. Others send me little pads of paper with my name on it. Some send pens or Christmas labels. And many of them, as I said, send me calendars. And they are beautiful, but how many calendars does one person need?

Actually, you know what, sometimes I think we don’t really need calendars because all we need to do in order to know what time of year it is, is go into a store and see their decorations. I mean, probably a month ago, just after Halloween ended, stores were decorating for Christmas. And no sooner will Christmas pass, than Valentine’s Day will be trumpeted.

So now we’re in the Christmas season, and everywhere, every day people are trying to get us to think about the gifts we need to get for people in our lives. We see it in the ads on television and in the newspaper, in personal emails from our favorite stores, and pop-up ads on Facebook. Everyday, in every way, we’re being wooed into gift buying.

Well, friends, today, I’m not going to try to get you to buy anything for anybody. I’m going to remind you that you yourself, that all of us, are receiving a gift this very day, and it’s called Advent. The four-week season in the church year leading us up to Christmas.

I’ve always loved Advent, since I was a little child. I think it was because of the anticipation, and being reminded every week that something wonderful was coming. I watched as each week we would light another candle in the Advent wreath, knowing that the more candles we lit, the closer we were coming to Christmas. I loved, as a child, taking part in the Red Stocking campaign for the Board of Child Care, filling that little cardboard red stocking with dimes and quarters through the days of Advent.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered, through my best friend Linda, who had grown up Southern Baptist in Texas, that she had never heard of Advent before becoming United Methodist. Never heard of Advent? I couldn't believe it. (She also had never heard of Lent in the Southern Baptist Church). I remember thinking when she told me that, how sad it was for her – never to have made the journey through Advent.

Apparently, as soon as December arrived, they simply celebrated Christmas the whole month. They went right to the manger, Mary and Joseph, twinkling stars, shepherd and wise men.

Not we who observe Advent. We start December – today- in what may seem like an odd place. Instead of the coming of Jesus in a manger, we focus on the coming again of Jesus, when all things will be made right, and the Kingdom of God will come in all its fullness. And we begin by dealing with the reality of life as it is.

You heard it in the scriptures – the reality of life is distress and confusion. People living in fear and foreboding. Distress among the nations. Sadly, though these words were written so very long ago, they ring true today. One pastor put it like this: “In prophetic language that sounds distressingly contemporary, Jesus describes a world reeling in pain – roaring seas, distress among nations, people fainting in fear.” (On-line, “When You See These Things,” Debbie Thomas, 11/25/18)

Those words sound all too familiar, don't they, because we see that happening all around us. David Lose, a wonderful writer, says that he believes “the greatest challenge we face today is not war, or economic inequity, or community unrest, or prejudice, or division, but fear. Why? (he continues) Because fear is at the root of all those other things.” (On-line, Courage!, David Lose, 11/28/18)

We do live in fearful times. We fear for our safety. We fear that we might not have enough. We fear people who are different from us. We fear nations that might strike us. And, as if each of us didn't have our own private fears, we're bombarded daily with messages from our leaders that are filled with fear.

Which is why the gift of Advent is so precious. Because in the midst of the fear-filled reality of life, comes the Wonderful Counselor, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Into the messiness of our world, comes One who centers us, shows us what matters. Into our fear, comes One who says, “Do not be afraid. I am with you.” Into the chaos that seems to never end, comes a baby born in a manger, who says, “I will make things right. The lion will lie down with the lamb. Nation shall not live up sword against nation. All will be well.”

And, in the meantime, in this in-between time, “there will be signs,” Jesus says. Lift up your heads and look for them. Signs showing us a better day. Signs reminding us of the never-ending presence of the God who loves us more than we know.

The journey of Advent is one of sign-watching. If we look, we will see signs all over the place. In the greens placed all around this room, we’ll remember evergreens, ever alive, even in winter, and know again the ever-present, unchanging nature of our God.

In the Advent wreath and its endless circle, we’ll be reminded that God’s love has no beginning and no end, but always is. As we light the candles, we’ll celebrate hope in God, peace from God, joy in God, love because of God.

We’ll gaze at the Nativity scene, the creche, and always remember that God loved us so much that he came to us as one of us, in the form of a baby, born just like us – fully human, yet fully divine.

And, if we have eyes to see, we’ll see signs outside of here as well. I saw a sign bright and clear just last week. A couple of months ago, Mike Brandon, who is the Executive Director of the Paris Foundation on Bridge Street, where people are fed every night of the year, approached the pastors of the Greater Elkton Ministerial Association looking for help. He needed people to help serve their Thanksgiving dinner. It would be right at the time many of us would be having our own Thanksgiving dinner with family and friends, so he was concerned about getting some help.

We agreed to help as we could, and when Mike posted the need to the Paris Foundation website, he put me as the contact person, since I’m the president of the ministerial association. Friends, I cannot tell you how many calls and emails I got with offers to help. It was overwhelming. There were so many, that I had to turn people away, and Mike had to remove the item from their website.

That’s a sign of the kingdom. That’s a sign that fear doesn’t always rule in these days. That’s a sign that people can care more about others in need than their own comfort and convenience. That’s a sign pointing to the kingdom that will come in all its fullness when Jesus comes again.

In the meantime, that and all the other signs around us, lead us to be people of hope, people of Advent hope. People who can face whatever life brings, even its ever-present fear, knowing that there is One who makes all things new, and in whom, all is well.

Writer Peter Lockhart put it like this: “We are an Advent people, called to live expectantly and so to live expressing our hope for God’s future by living as if it is already here, not dictated by our present sufferings but informed by the vision of what God has in store for all things.” (On-line, “Hope in a Mad World,” Peter Lockhart)

My friends, we are an Advent people. So let us venture into this season now with our heads held high looking for the signs of God all around us – the signs of a future in His hands, a future where all will be well.

In the meantime, today, in a few moments, come forward and see the signs that show, most perfectly of all, the depth of God’s love for us in Christ Jesus – the bread and the cup of Holy Communion. May they be a reminder to you that the baby born in that manger in Bethlehem, ultimately went to the cross that you might be free. And may they be a sign that hate and fear never have the final word, love does! Today, tomorrow and all the days to come. Thanks be to God!

Amen.