

The world is in between at Advent
First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2016, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
November 27, 2016

Travis and I have moved several times in the last few years, and we're gearing up for another one in a few weeks. I cannot say that I'm looking forward to it, though, of course, it brings some excitement as well. I'm not sure if the rest of you have experienced this, but one of the most peculiar feelings that I associate with moving is that funny moment when you're between homes. Once the last place is all packed up but before you've established residence in the new place, there is a moment—and usually a car ride—when a person actually doesn't live anywhere. I find this in between time both terrifying and exciting. In some ways unmoored; in some ways unfettered. The older I get, the more I think that this in between feeling is not very different from the religious life. And in a way, it might be an instructive image for Advent. These four weeks invite us into a time in between the world as it is and the world that we hope to see. In the darkness of these longer nights, we search for signs in the sky and in the people around us for the coming of Christ, the light of the world, God with us. We know Jesus will be born on Christmas morning. But for now, we look at the world as it is while preparing for the world as it should be. Christians are an in between people.

It must be very strange to watch us from the outside. We are a strange religion in many ways. Christians have a tendency to talk about hope and promise when lots of evidence points in the other direction. Here we sit, on a Sunday morning, praying and singing the ancient words of our faith, waiting with baited breath and quiet expectation for God to come among us—all the while knowing that there are wars, famines and cruelties all around us. Here we are, lighting a candle to bring a little more light into the world when that seems foolish given the enormity of the problems outside these red doors. We must look crazy to anyone looking in.

For two thousand years, our people have decided to stand in between the world as it is and the world as it should be. We straddle the cracks in society. We look into the breach and talk about hope. Even before the first Christians, the prophets came into Jerusalem and painted a picture of what the world ought to look like. Isaiah imagines a world in which justice and knowledge flow from God's mountain to every corner of the earth. The prophet imagines a scenario where the people hear the words of God and immediately begin to break their own swords and turn them into plows.

I've heard this verse my whole life—they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks—but for some reason it has struck me with particular power on this reading. As I was walking the dog the other day, I had this imagine of a lump of metal that wasn't quite a sword and wasn't quite a plow. In other words, I was thinking that the process of transformation isn't done yet. The metal is in between war and peace—despair and hope. And this is where I think we live as Christian people. We can see the end result—peace, abundance, health justice—but we know that we are not there yet. The world has not destroyed its sword just yet.

I think it takes a certain bravery to sit here, on the first Sunday of Advent, and proclaim that light is coming back into the world. I appreciate that bravery and foolishness are not terribly far apart. Still, I choose to think that we are brave. I think it is brave to stand up to the forces in the world that hurt and destroy and to say, “no—this is not what God has taught us.” “This is not our sacred vision.”

Advent is an invitation to pause, to look around for the signs in the sky and in the people around us of hope. I’ll admit that sometimes it seems like we have to look awfully hard. But they are there. Just about every week I see a new face in this parish—someone looking for a spiritual home, for a community to join to make a difference in the world. Just about every week, I see hands outstretched at the communion table, knowing that God will feed us and strengthen us for service. Just about every week, I read about some initiative in the news about people combatting a wrong in society because of their faith or their belief that the world can be better than it is.

And these moments give me hope when it would be all too easy to despair. Make no mistake, carrying an Advent hope in this world is an act of resistance, of defiance. It is pure Christian stubbornness to see the darkness all around and to light a candle anyway.

We know that swords are being beaten into plows all over this world all the time. But we also know that some swords stubbornly remain swords. The radical act is to keep hope all the same. The radical act is to join in the prophet’s imagination of a world more just and more peaceful than the one we currently inhabit.

I realize that many of our friends and peers reject religion because it can seem like a list of dos and don’ts along with outdated words and ideas about God. And it’s a fair critique. But it ignores what we are really doing here on Sunday morning. We are staging a resistance to the dominant narrative in the world that says it will stay dark forever. We reject that utterly by lighting this first Advent candle. With one voice, we say no: God is coming among us, and we can’t help but be inspired to participating in the healing of this world.

So, look around you this week. Look for the signs in the sky that spell hope. I guarantee you will see them. Look for the swords that need to be beaten into plows. I guarantee that you will see them as well. And most of all, look for the signs of the coming of God. Light the candle. Say the prayers. Love one another. Wait for God. Amen.