

First Sunday of Advent, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
December 2, 2018

One thing you'll notice if you drive through my hometown is that there are no billboards. In fact, in most of Alaska, you won't see any signs that are any higher than a two story house. I don't know the rules or regulations that govern that kind of thing, but I imagine that people thought that it was something of a sin to block the views of mountains and oceans. I like to think that it was a decision made on its own merits, but I have a feeling it had something to do with tourism.

Even as an adult, I find billboards to be jarring. There's one on the way to Madison that encourages you to get a second opinion in you have a cancer diagnosis. And there's one coming back from Chicago that advertises a gentleman's club, which I only assume is not chock full of gentlemen. My favorite is the one coming home from Door County that asks you if you know about the Bible and then offers an 800 number if you want more information. Perhaps St. Mark's should consider something like that. Joking aside, I find billboards garish, and I think they disrupt the landscape. But you can't deny that they are effective. It's nearly impossible to miss the fact that McDonald's is coming in three exists when there is an enormous red and yellow billboard looming over the highway.

Our Gospel today is basically the biblical equivalent of a billboard. It is neither subtle nor soothing. Jesus paints a picture of chaos and disruption that seems completely foreign to the sweetness we expect at this time of year. The biblical narrative has a long history of using this kind of language to shake us out of our complacency, and today is no different. Prophets from Isaiah to Jeremiah to Daniel have all written and foretold that there will be wars or famines or great signs in the sky alongside the arrival of God with us. We often ask that God be closer to us, but do we really know what it is we are asking?

Jesus suggests that when God comes to be with us, disruption follows. And I believe this is true. If you ever want to see an enormous and scary reaction, just offer a Christian response to a problem in the world and wait. Christians preach the release of captives. What happens when we advocate for the closing of our prisons? The response from law and order politicians and those with financial interests in the maintenance of our prison plantations is so loud, you can hardly hear anything else. Christians also preach the welcome of the foreigner. Did we send 5,000 caseworkers to the border to sort through asylum requests? No, we did not. We sent 5,000 armed troops and tear gas for children. The bible has been telling us for millennia that when the way of God meets the way of the world, sparks fly, storms blow, and armies march.

The watchword for Advent is "prepare." And most years, I've understood this to be a spiritual preparation in one's heart--sort of getting an interior home ready for the Christchild to be born. But this year's readings, and frankly, this year's headlines, make me wonder if the preparation might need to be more tangible. What are we doing right now, individually and as a community, to midwife the birth of God in our midst? And, are we prepared for the storms and upheaval that will definitely follow if we hew to the road that Jesus has laid out before us?

I'll confess that I'm not as prepared as I would like to be. Perhaps you feel that way too. I sometimes find the responsibility of being a Christian overwhelming. You mean, all those people are my brothers and sisters? Even the ones who I don't like? Even the ones who don't think the way I think? You mean, I'm supposed to care for the orphan AND the widow AND the alien, AND downtrodden? When would I possibly find the time? I have so, so many emails and phone calls to return.

But those really are the marching orders. They aren't spiritual, and they aren't optional. The Christian message is scandalous and audacious. We really believe that Jesus made us all beloved siblings, and we really believe that they have serious implications for how we interact with the world. And Jesus is telling us today that when we act like His followers, there will be reactions. And they won't be subtle. They will be huge and garrish and as obvious as a billboard on 94 East.

The good news, as far as I can tell, is that we're not by ourselves in a reasonably priced 2011 Camry, like I usually am. Instead, we are in one of those big motor coaches that stretches back through time and space, and we're in it with every other Christian who ever has lived and ever will live. We're all together, following Jesus as best as we can, even when the signs spell doom and despair. We have one another, and we have our God. So be prepared this Advent for the world to react in a big way when you choose again to follow Jesus. But be equally prepared for the grace and the mercy and the peace that comes from God along the way. Amen.