

First Sunday of Advent, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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This weekend marks the official start to four weeks of Christmas music, lighted reindeer, office parties, and terrible but oddly compelling Hallmark movies. There's a sweetness in the air, with ringing bells and beautiful shop window displays brightening our lives and enticing us to think about gifts and friends and family.

The irony is not lost on me that the Gospel readings on the first Sunday of Advent every year have something to do with the tumult and discord that will arrive with the coming of Jesus the Christ. This morning's text is no exception: "For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man."

It's not a rosy picture, and it is certainly at odds with the mistletoe and tinsel that hang in our homes at this time of year.

So, what are we to make of this juxtaposition — the sweet season of lights and candy canes alongside the words of warning and prophecy from Scripture?

Whenever I see apocalyptic language in the Bible — and you can usually recognize it by some dreadful thing or another about to happen — I'm reminded of the ancient wisdom that tells us that change brings with it unrest. At Advent, we look toward a new kind of ruler who will emphasize peace and will confound the leaders of the world. Our ancestors understood that the arrival of Christ would challenge the powers that be, the way things are and have always been done. I think it's the consequences of change that the text is warning about. And we all intuitively know that change is destabilizing. Imagine a family that always has Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma's. Now imagine one year, someone suggests going to a restaurant instead. There's no world in which that conversation doesn't come with any conflict or heat. Now times that by about a million when you are talking about things as consequential as war or peace or justice or equality or identity. When Jesus comes, there simply is going to be some adjacent chaos while the world adjusts to a new way, a new love, a new kind of God.

Most years, on this first Sunday of Advent, I've focused on the chaos that accompanies the inbreaking of God into society or even the world. But this Advent, I wanted to look a little closer to home.

For the last ten months, St. Mark's has been trying to figure out what is coming next for us. Advent, literally, means coming. It's the season when we prepare for the coming of God — the beautiful stuff and the scary stuff — into the world. St. Mark's has been spending a lot of time doing preparation work. We've been asking big questions about the nature of our church, about

our role in the community, about our physical space, and about our mission. What is God planning to bring into the world through this Church? What are we doing to prepare?

I know that we generally encourage a look outward from the parish into the world, but for a couple of weeks, I'd like us to look inward and to see if we are doing a good job of preparing a place here at St. Mark's for God.

In our round table conversations, among the vestry, and then again in our world-cafe conversation with some of the church leaders, four themes have come up over and over again as we tried to understand what God is doing at St. Mark's.

The people of St. Mark's feel called to a ministry of radical welcome. I have seen cradle Episcopalians, atheists, and everything in between welcomed into this community — for one Sunday, for one season, for a lifetime. This is a gift that we don't often see bestowed on Christian churches. What do we believe God is preparing for us in the ministry of radical welcome?

The people of St. Mark's feel called to a ministry of connection. I have seen strangers become friends over coffee in our parish hall. I've seen older members befriend and support younger members; I've seen younger members befriend and support older members. I've seen the most remarkable hospitality and graciousness happen among people over conversation about the simplest things. What do we believe God is preparing for us in the ministry of connection.

The people of St. Mark's feel called to a ministry of outreach and service to the community. I have seen diapers collected, meals served, foreclosed homes purchased and rehabilitated, and elders given support and succor in the community. This place has a big heart and a passion for mission in the world. What do we believe God is preparing for us in the ministry of service?

The people of St. Mark's feel called to a ministry of healing. I've watched this parish over and over provide a safe, non-threatening, and quiet space for people to come and to figure out where they are on their walk with God. People who are bruised and beat up by the church or the world find healing in this sanctuary. What do we believe God is preparing for us in the ministry of healing?

This Advent, I want you to pray for our church. I want you to pray that God will guide the direction of St. Mark's in the days, months, and years to come. I want you to pray that our conversations all year have helped us focus our mission as we try to figure out to do with our money, our personnel, our physical plant, our time, and our energy.

Advent is all about preparing the way for God to come and make a home among us. The Scriptures warn that this process can be rocky. Pray about that too — pray that we can have the strength to withstand change when it comes and that we can be wise in our efforts to prepare the parish for the next decades just as our ancestors prepared it for us.

Change will bring tumult. The thing is, that's okay. Just like there are labor pains at a birth, there are pains when whatever it is God has prepared for us finally arrives.

So, in this season of Advent, pray for St. Mark's and for each other. Pray that we have the wisdom to do what is right, what is wise, and what will prepare the way for God in this space. Amen.