

First Sunday of Advent, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
November 28, 2021

I tell people I like to read science fiction novels. But that's not exactly true. I much prefer fantasy novels, but that always seems a little childish to say. But the truth of the matter is that I would much rather read about magic and dragons than about spaceships and lasers. I am only a tiny bit ashamed to admit that I waited in line for midnight releases of the Harry Potter books well after I was too old to be doing those kinds of things. The great writer Ursula Le Guinn says that fantasy and science fiction should be categorized as speculative fiction, which I have always liked. Whatever you call it, I'm here for the dragons.

One of the things I like about speculative fiction is the way in which, by building a made-up world, an author can play with ideas that could impact our own world. In one of my favorite series — fourteen books and well over ten thousand pages — the author invented a group of people that he called the Traveling People. I think they are loosely based on the Roma people of Hungary who travel all over Europe in their caravans and do not have one particular spot that they call home. The fictional Traveling People are pacifists who roam the earth, always peacefully. Whenever they meet someone new, they invite them into their camp, offer them warm hospitality, and ask them one question: do you know the song?

I find this idea captivating — that a community of people could have lost a song and then spend generations trying to find it. Do you know the song? We have lost it.

The image of a lost song came to me as I was reading our Gospel lessons for today. It is, of course, the first Sunday of Advent, and this is the day that the church starts a new year. Our readings begin again for the year, and all of a sudden, everything we hear in church sounds a tiny bit mysterious. Signs in the heavens and chaos on the earth that portend a momentous event that we can't quite imagine yet. By Christmas, we will understand a little better, but for right now, we aren't quite sure what is coming. Or, put another way, we are still seeking for our song.

When I look around at our world right now, it is even more clear to me lately that we don't know what our song should be. As my heart aches for our siblings down the road in Waukesha. As my heart aches for our siblings down the road in Kenosha. As I think about the way in which a kind of ignorant nastiness has crept into our national character, it is clear to me we don't know the song we are supposed to be singing. It can easily lead to despair.

But despair is the one thing that Christians must not allow. We are people who prize faith and hope, and in the Gospel this morning Jesus says, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." That is very hard to do. But we strive.

We are kind of like the Traveling People right now — moving from work to home to the store to the post office — wondering if we are going to hear the song we are yearning to hear. Sometimes

we catch strains of it — when justice or kindness or mercy are practiced. But often we hear discord — when greed or cruelty or casual racism grate against our senses.

As it is now Advent, we are going to spend the next four weeks straining our ears, listening for the song that we know is out there. We know it because every year, at this time, we start to prepare for the coming of Immanuel on Christmas morning. And in these weeks leading up to that blessed event, we might have to strain a little to really listen to the song that is coming into the world.

And when we finally hear it, something extraordinary will begin to happen. When we hear God's song on Christmas morning, we will have no choice but to start singing it ourselves. We will sing about the love God has for this world, even when it seems broken. We will sing about the way that a little baby in a manger will remake all of creation. We will sing about how the weak will inherit the earth, about how war will be a thing of the past, and about how the hungry will be fed, the righteous will lead us, and the wicked will be cast down.

So, travel with me this Advent. Walk with me, slowly and deliberately, toward Bethlehem, the city of David. Pay attention to what is happening all around you. Look for signs in the sky and listen for the song of joy and peace that we know is out there. Be kind to yourself on this journey — this time of year can be difficult. It can be hard to know what to listen for. Here's a tip: there is nothing wrong with Jingle Bells, but it's really not the song we are after.

I wish you a blessed Advent, filled with the slow revelation of the approaching birth of Jesus. Mary is 36 weeks along and so eager to meet her son. I want this to be a time of peace for your mind and your soul in the midst of the chaos out there. I want you — and me for that matter — to be centered in the expectation that, some evidence to the contrary, God is coming into our world, and that birth will be music to our ears. Amen.