

First Sunday of Advent, Year A  
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
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I can remember being about 13 and spending a lot of time loitering around my dad while he worked on different automotive and carpentry projects in our garage. I remember the smells of oil and gasoline along with the light dusting of sawdust on every surface. Mostly, though, I remember the music. He listened to Beethoven, Bach, and Chopin almost constantly. But, every once in a great while, he would take a break from those titans of music and throw on the station that played the music of the 60s. And I would roll my eyes and complain to my dad that he was playing the oldies. He just smiled and told me that there is something special about the music that we listened to when we were young. It's like a time machine. And he was right, of course. I wash the dishes now to Madonna and Janet Jackson while my nieces haven't the vaguest idea who they are. If you make me do the math, I can tell you that 1995 was almost 30 years ago, but to me, it feels more like about 5. The older I get, the more time is all wobbly and imprecise. The calendar tells us that time moves in a line, but I think the calendar is wrong. For most societies, for most of history, time has been understood, not as a line, but as a circle, (as a parishioner recently reminded me.)

And, of course, this is how both the Bible and the church think about time. We find ourselves this morning at the beginning of a new church year, the first Sunday of Advent. The great circle of the liturgy has completed its dance, and now it is time for a new one. This year's calendar will at the same time be absolutely new as well as a repeat of every Advent the church has ever observed. Just look around: we have the candles and the change of costume. We have the expectant carols and the readings that spin doom and hope into poetry. We turn our eyes toward the manger just like our ancestors did before us, and we do it fresh this year.

It is all change, and it is all the same. When St. Mark's celebrated its 125th anniversary a few years ago, I had the opportunity to read some of the documents that were left over from when this church built the 1949 parish hall building. And, as you might imagine, the congregation then was nervous about taking on a big project. And they were not in agreement about the plans for the new space. And, of course, they were worried about money and where it would come from. It is eerie to read the cares and concerns of people who have long since died – especially since they read as if they are the same cares and concerns we have now, 75 years later. In one sense, what we face today as a congregation is new and unique to our generation. And in another sense, we are dancing the same dance that our spiritual forebears have already danced. Everything is different at St. Mark's, and everything is the same.

The prophet Isaiah writes about God's hope for the justice that will come at the end of time. Isaiah is writing about his time and the injustices that he sees among the privileged few in Jerusalem society who are building their wealth on the backs of the poor. But he is writing about our time as well. About the ways that we perpetuate injustices large and small in this day and age. And he is talking about the end of time, when God will complete the work of justice. These poems in the old testament are about a future heaven. But they are also about a holy present. Isaiah could be talking about God being present in Jerusalem during the prophet's own time, God being present in some kind of afterlife, God being present in a little church in Wisconsin. God's time is a circle. And God's presence and justice are always here and always longed for all at the same time. There are always swords that need to be turned into plowshares. Every time we share bread and wine, we are in our own time, and we are also in the upper room with Jesus and his friends the night before he died.

In Advent, we look to the heavens for signs of the coming of God. Just like we did last year, and just like we will do next year. Like my dad in his garage, we know that the songs of our time are important and need to be sung. But Christians also think in terms of generations—those saints who came before us and those saints who aren't born yet. We know that when we are in our graves, there will be people in the church, listening to the poems of Isaiah on the first Sunday of Advent and anticipating the coming of God into the world at Christmas. I will go to my death knowing that the church is in good hands and hoping that I have done my part in my time.

So, if everything in the Christian faith is simply a cycle, what is the good news? I think that the good news is that God is with us – Immanuel – at every point in the circle. When we are crying over the senselessness of yet another shooting, God is there, grieving alongside us. When we are elated at the birth of a new child here in the St. Mark's family, God is likewise there. And when we make our final song and say goodbye to this world, God is right there as we shut our eyes for the last time. There is no place in all of time and space where God cannot or will not reach. And we are never alone as we move around this circle.

To be a Christian is to be a time traveler, like listening to old music with fresh ears. We are on the mountain with Isaiah. We are listening at the foot of Matthew as he gives his frightening prophecy. And we are here this morning supporting and loving one another. And, in the greatest Christian trick of all, we are living at the end of time when God will bring divine justice to the world and all the tears that we have shed for all the horrible things we have seen will be washed away. Christ is born. Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Amen.