

Welcome to the first day of the church new year everyone! On this first Sunday of Advent, we remember that Advent is a season of preparation, of tending to our hearts and minds and spirits and even bodies for the reality of Jesus entering into the world. And this preparation is so important for not only our own spiritual well-being, but for the sake of the world. Preparation for the newness of life that comes not only in the turning of a new year, a fresh page, but also in the coming of Jesus Christ, is a holy gift, and the anticipation should not be ignored, as tough or unfamiliar as it may feel at times.

The preparations we do in Advent, of watching, praying, singing, worshipping, reading, listening, and noticing light and darkness, are the actions of faith and hope that nourish us and the world around us.

These kinds of preparations, like my colleague Pastor Lucas Ladnier says, are not like the preparation of standing in an elevator waiting to get to your destination floor. The preparations of Advent are more like preparing a Thanksgiving feast, with lots of planning and bustling, cleaning and tidying the house, menu prepping and grocery shopping and recipe hunting and cooking and remembering that the turkey does actually need multiple days to defrost before you can cook it. I don't know this from experience, it's fine.

We often see preparation as an idle thing, especially in our faith. We think of waiting and watching as things done only by ourselves, something to sit and just wait to happen to us. But this season is not just what happens to us, it's what happens for us. It's about what we're going to do to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ, the world-changing Messiah given to us out of the great love of God. The season of Advent, the season of preparing for Christ is an active season of faith and hope, love and joy. Our Gospel lesson today reminds us of this activeness that comes with preparation and anticipation. Jesus calls us to keep awake, keep alert, for you do not know when the master of the house will come. We must keep awake and keep alert to help us to keep our focus on the preparations.

Though it's not always easy to get to that place of active preparation, of actionable hope and faith that Advent calls us to. In this current season, of so many unknowns and so much grief, I think many of us can relate to the first couple of verses in this Gospel reading.

Our Gospel text opens by talking about the days of suffering, when the sun is darkened, and the moon will not give its light.

Anyone who has experienced a challenging mental health situation or intense grief particularly can certainly tell you how easy it is to just want to give up, zone out, distract, or escape from what is happening around us because the pain and struggle of what it is to be human fills us with this void that makes it nearly impossible to get out of our own heads.

So often it's easy when we are waiting or nervous or anxious or scared to just turn in on ourselves and abandon what is actually life-giving for us. And that's a type of waiting that we can understand is real, but it does not need to hold us captive.

Of course, these opening words of our Gospel today are kind of bleak, and I imagine what Jesus is talking about feels in our bodies like what I described above, that our powers are shaken and we fall into some kind of pit. So how could we possibly muster up the frenzied energy of preparation in this midst of this dark and difficult season?

We start first with hope. Hope is living into a promise that there is something new on the horizon. Hope is when you don't give up on what is yet to come. Hope comes when there is even the smallest something that tells us to hang on. Hope is the root of the promise of Jesus, of the season of Advent itself. Hope is what we find when we acknowledge that God is still with us, even in the midst of the pit or the difficult season. Hope is what fills the words "then they will see" in our Gospel text today.

The season of Advent is for us to prepare for Christ's arrival in the world, and the way that's described in our Gospel today is not exactly a gentle or calming arrival. We hear that "the Son of Man will come in the clouds with

great power and glory!". Now I'm not sure about you, but if I'm in a place where grey clouds reflect my mood more than a bright and shining new life kind of Jesus, seeing great power and glory accompany Jesus amidst my clouds may be really overwhelming and disorienting!

But we learn that Jesus will show up for us in truly all times and places. Even in the midst of our darkest pits and hardest seasons, Jesus is with us. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come," we hear. The time could be in the dark pit or the bright light of new life. The time could be in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn.

We don't always know how or when Jesus will show up with and for us. But in our keeping awake, keeping alert, and preparing through prayer and worship, listening and noticing, we open ourselves up to the life-giving changes that come with Jesus' arrival. These are the actions we can take to truly let the reality of the long-awaited Messiah fill us with new life. The prophet Isaiah proclaims, "O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." So let's open ourselves up to be the work of God's hand. Because once Jesus is born, the world will never be the same. Jesus is God's love for us made tangible, made human, made our fellow person of flesh and blood and feelings and body. And that physical reality changes everything.

Ultimately, dear friends, what we are preparing for is the good news of Jesus Christ himself. The good news is that Jesus Christ is coming so soon, and there are signs of his goodness and joy and new life all around us, no matter what time or season we are in. The good news is that even in our waiting, our anticipation, our anxiety or brokenness or hopelessness, Jesus is still coming into our world with great power and glory. Heaven and earth will pass away, but the Words of God in Jesus Christ will never pass away. Let us prepare the way for Christ to come into our lives in the here and now, with active faith, by watching, waiting, praying, and hoping, for

that life-saving, holy love of God made human in Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God, Amen.