

RUUMC 11-29-2020
Isaiah 7:14, 9:2-7
The Hope We Have- Expect a Miracle

Happy New Year!

Some of you might be surprised by that greeting, but our Church calendar runs differently than the calendar on the wall. We begin our new church year today, the first Sunday of Advent. So, again, happy new church year! I hope the new year brings you hope and peace and joy and love and the blessings of renewal and new life.

Today, we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent, a season in which we proclaim the coming of the Christ. During Advent, we celebrate the birth of Jesus once again and anticipate his return. Every year around this time, we begin our Advent observation once again. It is one of the most important seasons of the year for Christians. But this year, Advent feels a little different. This year has been unlike any other in my lifetime because of the global pandemic. The pandemic protocols have forced us to change even the ways we celebrate Advent and Christmas.

Last year and all the years before, we celebrated quite differently than we will this year. We worshipped in our beautifully decorated sanctuary with real Advent candles. Our awesome choir sang joyful Christmas carols. Beautiful special music for Advent was offered. We celebrated the first Sunday of Advent along with LOTS POTS and the hanging of the greens after worship. How about our tradition of sharing Christmas cards and greetings? This year, we may grieve the loss of most, if not all, of these traditions, and it's a big loss for us all.

In the midst of the loss of our Advent traditions, however, this season in 2020 calls us to remember that no matter what life throws at us, the Prince of Peace still arrives. In fact, that is the heart of Advent, isn't it? And yes, the losses are hard, but think about how much harder they could be without the wonderful technology that makes it possible for us to celebrate Advent virtually. While we cannot meet in person for worship, I invite us all to prepare ourselves spiritually for the coming of God once again, and for Jesus' promised return to this world.

As I was preparing this sermon, I remembered a visit I had with one of our church members last year. It was a beautiful morning in December that he dropped by during office hours to chat and to thank me for my sermon on the first Sunday of Advent. He said I had answered a question for him that he had pondered for decades. Immediately, I began to wonder what I could have said to answer his decades-long question. He told me that he had wondered for years why Methodists celebrate Advent as a season awaiting the arrival of the Prince of Peace at Christmas since it happened

2000 years ago. If the covenant of God-With-Us was fulfilled so long ago, why were we still waiting? Why were we looking to the past year after year? Our friend made a good point, didn't he? We all know that Jesus, the Prince of Peace, arrived on earth some 2000 years ago in a little town called Bethlehem. Through my sermon, however, our friend learned that Advent is also a season in which we await and prepare ourselves for the return of the Prince of Peace in his final victory. He was pleased because this reaffirmed his faith in our hope for the future.

Advent is the Season in which we celebrate the “comings” of Christ: both his past coming to a manger in Bethlehem 2000 years ago as well as his future coming to this world. Advent reminds us that God’s Kingdom is both now and not yet. On this first Sunday of Advent, we focus on the hope we have in God. Hope is “a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.”¹ Advent is a Season of Hope, of Anticipation. But it is more than that. As much as we celebrate the past and anticipated comings of Christ, we also celebrate his continuous coming into the present moment of here and now in both Word and Spirit.² During Advent, we celebrate the past, present, and future comings of Christ in our world and in our lives.

For most of us, there has never been an Advent like this one. This year, we have witnessed and experienced so much pain from the effects of the Coronavirus in every corner of our lives. Our physical and mental health, our economy, our job market, our industry, our formal education, and our social lives have suffered significantly from the global pandemic. To date, almost 1.5M people worldwide have died from COVID-19. It’s a staggering number. I cannot count the number of clergy colleagues who are grieving the loss of beloved church members to this deadly virus. I have been heartbroken at the number of people mourning the loss of proper funerals and memorial services. In addition to the seemingly never-ending losses, we also face uncertainty. We have no idea how long this pandemic will last or what our future will bring. As the prophet Isaiah said in today’s Scripture reading, we are walking in darkness without knowing. That is a bit terrifying. If you have ever walked down a dark street or hallway alone, or lost your job unexpectedly or been in a freak accident of some sort, you probably understand what it is like to fear the unknown.

Right now, the whole world is suffering immensely from this virus and the negative impact it has wrought on our lives. In these dark days, we search for light, don't we? We want to see clearly rather than live in this murky morass. In these

¹ [hope - Google Search](#)

²The United Methodist Church Book of Worship Committee, *The United Methodist Church Book of Worship*, (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Church Publishing House, 1992), 238.

uncertain pandemic days: Where do we see Christ's coming to us? Where do we see Advent hope in this messy world filled with lament and uncertainty? How do we help usher in Christ's coming to the world in this time and this place?

While wrestling with these questions, I meditated on the birth of Jesus. Without a doubt, Mary and Joseph suffered some difficult days in their journey to bring God's Son into the world. When Mary was near the expected time of Jesus' birth, she and Joseph traveled about 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. When one is "great with child," travel is not the best idea. Everything feels more difficult, and every bump in the road hurts. But Cesar Augustus demanded a census be taken, so off they went to Bethlehem because Joseph's family was from there. On foot, the trip probably took several days. Part of the road was flat. Part of it was uphill, going through mountains and valleys. You know Mary had to have wondered what they would do if she gave birth on that trip. Would there be any place for her to give birth safely? Would her baby survive? Would she survive the risky and painful childbirth? Would there be anyone to help her?

And wouldn't you know it? Mary did give birth on that trip in conditions that were not ideal for any newborn. She had to lay her baby in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. We don't know exactly where Mary gave birth to Jesus. It might have been in a barn. Or maybe not. We don't know. But we do know it was not in a comfortable inn because there was no place for them in any of those, childbirth or not. Their journey and Jesus' birth were risky and messy: much like our lives.

Like every newborn baby, Jesus arrived in a messy world. His birth was not safe nor easy. He arrived in the darkness of uncertainty and risks. The circumstances seemed impossible. However, God faithfully fulfilled God's covenant despite the many challenges. Jesus' birth in those circumstances was a miracle, wasn't it? I think that makes Mary and Joseph miracle workers! Mary said yes to God's call to bear God's Son into the world. She wasn't married, just engaged to Joseph. In her community, she could have been stoned for being pregnant before she married. That's brave! How about Joseph? He embraced his fiancé's pregnancy even before their marriage after the angel of God explained to him that Mary was carrying God's Son. These are all audacious acts by ordinary people like you and me. God chose the humble and ordinary people to make a miracle: the birth of God-With-Us. The coming of the Messiah was made possible through their faithful response.

Scripture, Tradition, and our own Experience teach us that God does not stop working in the world, no matter how messy it is. We know Christ does not stop coming to us, even in these crazy days of global pandemic. Our God is still seeking and calling ordinary people to bring Christ's hope to this world: the world that is waiting for a light

in the darkness. The results of the pandemic seem overwhelming. The losses from this pandemic are devastating. However, it is God who does extraordinary works through ordinary people like you and me. With God's help and with our faithful commitment, we can bring Christ's hope to this hurting world.

Our work does not need to be something gigantic or elegant. It simply begins with our response to God's prompt. As we venture forth on this new and unpredictable journey of Advent, may we pay attention to what God is speaking to us deep in our hearts. God could be prompting us to call our neighbors as they grieve the loss of loved ones or our friends and neighbors who are suffering from COVID-19. Maybe God is prompting us to pray for our friends who are seeking new opportunities, even if it's over the phone. Perhaps God is encouraging us to get involved in the University Church efforts to care for the students, faculty, and staff at Franklin Elementary School. It may be that God has given one or more of you some exciting ideas of ways to expand our outreach to Franklin! When we feel God's prompt, God's calling, let us remember how God used ordinary people like Mary and Joseph to do God's marvelous work in the world.

Friends, few of us are comfortable with the unknown. Moving forward in times of uncertainty sometimes feels impossible. We do not know what is in front of us. However, we are not the first ones to feel that way. Mary and Joseph did not know what the future held when Mary conceived God's child by the Spirit. Abraham left his home to follow God's call, not knowing where to go. Moses and the Israelites journeyed in the wilderness for 40 years, not knowing when they could enter the Promised Land. Even though our lives are filled with uncertainty and sorrows during these pandemic days, Advent calls us to trust God and to move forward to share Christ's hope with the world.

So, friends, as we enter these days of Advent, let us continue our prayerful discernment to see how we can share Christ's coming with the world, how we can demonstrate Advent hope in these challenging days. May Advent hope live in your heart, and may you be a blessing to all you meet.

Amen.