

WITNESS TO THE WORD:

And Jesus said: "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Nora Gallagher, American author and essayist, writes, "The church calendar calls into consciousness the existence of a world uninhabited by efficiency, a world filled with the excessiveness of saints, ashes, smoke and fire; it fills my heart with both dread and hope." ...a fitting quotation to begin our reflection on this first Sunday in Advent, the Sunday of Hope.

I love Advent. I love its mystery and traditions, its sense of expectation. But Advent is different for those of us who follow the Way of the Prince of Peace. It is also difficult. For the Christian church, Advent begins today and continues until Christmas Eve which, incidentally, is the **first** of the twelve days of Christmas.

But for the rest of society, Christmas starts sometime in October and builds with growing intensity into a shopping, eating, drinking, partying frenzy until everyone collapses with exhaustion sometime late on Christmas Day. And it's **so** hard to resist because there is a very loud and powerful, profit centred advertising industry backing it up.....

..... and it is **so** hard to hear the still small voice of hope and peace and joy and love that calls out longingly: "O come, O come Emmanuel...."

Yes Advent **is** about hope and peace and love and joy, but there is a shadow side to Advent. And when we sing that great Advent hymn, "O come, O come Emmanuel", we are immediately one with a people in exile and with all the exiles, refugees, captives and asylum seekers of today and across the ages. We are at one with the people of Gaza, Israel and Palestine. We hear the reports of ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas in Myanmar, the persecution of the Uighurs in China, of famine in Yemen and people trafficking around the world and like the prophet Isaiah we too cry out:

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.....to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!"

The prophet Isaiah was speaking to a people in exile who were struggling under oppression and longed for God to intervene and save them.

This is the paradox that fills Nora Gallagher's heart with 'dread and hope'.

The author of the Gospel of Mark must have had similar conflicted feelings when he addressed a first-century community of Jewish and Gentile Christians who were also facing persecution. He urges them to endure their suffering by holding onto the sure and certain hope of Jesus' return in glory when they will be saved from their oppression.

United Church of Christ theologian Kathryn Matthews Huey suggests that these readings are clearly not about the promise of a little baby, born in a manger, with a star in the sky and shepherds gathered and Three Kings on the way.

And yet they are consistent with the readings of the other Sundays in Advent, for our liturgical year begins with a time of preparation not only for Christmas, and that manger scene, but also for the **coming of God's reign in all of its fullness**, the time of judgment, the dismantling of the present order, the end time. Listen again to Mark's apocalyptic description of these events:

"the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heaven."

When we think about the exiled Israelites and that persecuted little band of early Christians surrounded by powerful forces that threatened them with extinction, how comforting and inspiring these images must have been to them - *they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory!*

The God they trusted was faithful and would come with power greater than that of the Roman Empire itself and lift them right out of their terrible situation. Then Jesus would establish his longed-for realm of love and justice – right then, in their own lifetimes.

We now understand Mark's words to be apocalyptic in the fearful, visionary style of ancient Middle Eastern literature and the Hebrew bible. But for us in the twenty-first century our fears are naturalistic rather than supernatural. Our planet is in trouble; we see signs of its destruction, of dying species and collapsing glaciers, of extreme climates changes; our Great Barrier Reef dying and our koalas at great risk.

Mark's words are not about the so called 'second coming', the rapture or the bizarre end time predictions that have come and gone over the decades.

This passage is about being **awake and alert** to God's presence in the here and now, in the everyday activities of our lives, whether it's caring for our families, tapping away on our laptops, praying in the peace of our gardens, answering an email, playing with our grandchildren. It is being awake to the divine and being alert to the possibilities of **transformation**. But it is also about waiting actively, not passively.

The Gospel passage ends with a parable that Jesus tells about a man leaving on a journey and putting his servants in charge, telling them to be on watch, to be awake, to be alert.

'And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake'.

Today we are those servants of God, each with our own work, our own calling, waiting not passively but *actively* for the coming reign of God in all of its fullness. The work God began in the ministry of Jesus, continues in our midst. We are faithful disciples not when we focus on the future and obsess about the end of the world but when we commit our lives, here and now, to the great work of God, repairing this world, shaping a new creation of beauty, grace, justice, and joy, leaning into the reign of God, and trusting that future to God, and God's own timing.

Advent reminds us that we are people of hope, prophetic people who can dream of new paths towards peace and reconciliation....**people who follow the Man whose humble birth heralded the beginning of hope for the world. Amen.**