

Happy New Year. Welcome to the First Sunday in Advent, the first Sunday of the Church Year, which always arrives at the cusp of November and December, a time of endings and beginnings, whose long, dark nights are like a womb, cradling a people who are both fearful and excited to be reborn.

We begin Advent as any New Year celebration begins, by sweeping away all that is old. In the flamboyant style of our faith, we don't just clean up the house, send the kitchen god packing, or get rid of all the leavened breadcrumbs. We clean up an entire world.

The first Sunday of Advent is always apocalyptic. It both ends the world and opens our eyes to what that world really was.

“For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.”

Being reborn is kind of like that. Being swept away from all you ever knew into a new and surprising reality. Or as Jesus said: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

The First Sunday of Advent is a cosmic wake up call. It asks us to open our eyes to what is really going on around and within us. It is like the Simon and Garfunkel song “Silent Night/Six o'clock News.” Advent both comforts and warns.

It asks us to be still in an uncertain and fearful world and listen for the voice of God. Since Advent has been going on for two thousand years, it is safe to say that the world has always been in an uncertain and fearful condition. To be awake is to deal with that. To resist frenzy with joy. To face the day and not be swept away by passions.

T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" is the classic poem of Advent. It was written during the London blitz of 1940, those 56 nights of German bombings, when waiting was reduced to the matter of raw survival. Eliot spent that time of fear writing a masterpiece of a poem about endings and beginnings. Within that long poem are these words:

*In the uncertain hour before the morning*

*Near the ending of interminable night* (take a breath and read that again)

It's an image that does what poetry does best: hold impossible opposites together: for how can an hour, designed to be an accurate measurement of time, be uncertain and how can an unending night ever end? We might say that the last two thousand years have been an unending night of violence, slavery, inquisition, and raw power. Advent asks us to put an end to all that. How can we cultivate power that helps rather than harms? That makes us sane rather than crazy? How can we bring a new day into our consciousness and live it? How can we deal with the uncertainty of being alive, the fear and suffering, or as Paul says in his letter to the Romans: "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For

salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light”

Awareness is the first step toward salvation.

There's a poetic tension between today's gospel and epistle. Paul is reassuring us that the day is near. But history says differently: that the night of ignorance and fear is truly interminable. It is still going on. When will our species finally get its act together? Will we ever get our act together? Jesus says, “About that day and hour no one knows.”

But Jesus arrives to tell us that an interminable night can end. Maybe we cannot know the day and the hour, because there is no single day, no single hour. Jesus comes when we are ready to see him.

Our readings today show us the two ways of waiting. One is to carry on as if the suffering of the world has nothing to do with me and I'm going to go on just as before. The other way of waiting is to open my eyes to everything in the room. To try and read the signs of the times. To see the tracks left by Jesus. To grow still and glow in the dark with the light of love.

To build an ark that will carry us through the storms of rage.

People have already shown us the way. Julian of Norwich lost everything in the Black Death. With God, she found peace. Even after all she went through, she could still write, “And all shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well.” People

flocked to her cell to receive her blessing. The Dalai Lama lost his entire country. He found joy among his people in exile. He has blessed millions with his kindness.

Just as Julian and His Holiness faced the darkness, Advent asks us to think about what it means to be saved, what it looks like to find peace during the storms of our time. Forget what the church says. Get personal. What would it take to make you feel saved? How would it feel like to live in a saved world?

In the last century, we fought two wars to end all wars. We're still doing it. But maybe the real war is not between nations but within the human heart.

What does it mean to be saved?

“Father, forgive them,” said Jesus from the cross last Sunday, “for they do not know what they are doing.”

Imagine thinking that you could ever execute God.

As he was dying, Jesus told the thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Violence never works. Paradise is not an impossible fantasy.

Ignorance is the work of darkness. Paradise is the armor of light.

Forgiveness and not punishment, says Jesus, is how we can make ourselves great again. We have all been broken by the world. Greatness does not mean we should go on breaking it back. We need to stop, pray, and do the work of healing.

For that is what Jesus came to do.

Now that I have finally reached old age, I can see my own brokenness clearly. I was shut down by mass civilization and extremely unhappy parents. My suffering was

largely second hand: the wounds of wars I never saw, generations of oppressed and frustrated women.

Those who are actually in those wars, deportations, and mass arrests experience trauma firsthand.

Still, however our traumas arrive, all of us deal with them by hiding. By going to sleep.

All suffering, whether great or small, has the capacity to shut us down. When we can't be who we are, we become what we are not. Or as Buddhist scholar and therapist Aura Glaser writes, "One of the essential elements of life is the understanding that everything we encounter—fear, resentment, jealousy, embarrassment—is actually an invitation to see clearly where we are shutting down and holding back."

The people who were acting mindlessly in the days of Noah, eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage, they were not themselves necessarily evil. Like us, they were trapped in a system. I suspect they, too, were shut down, seeking solace in the pleasures which would dull their pain, and blind them to the gathering storm.

I empathize with those days. I'm an American. I was taught to work hard and play hard. The advertising world told me "I'm worth it." I was offered all manner of escape. It's taken me years to even begin to see beyond that, to wake up, to understand that God's grace and salvation do not reside in my bank account but in

my heart, to revel in the greatness of ordinary things. To have the courage to discover not the person I should be, but the person I am. To resist, not by judgment or fight, but by melting hard hearts with the heat of God's love. By seeing that paradise is real, because I've been there. By experiencing a God so great it makes the entirety of our history look like one very bad dream.

The hour has arrived to wake up from that dream.

Waking up takes time.

Advent is the gift of time.

Advent is about letting things come to an end so that new things can spring to life.

Advent is about embracing the darkness and being surprised by the light.

And letting the love we have for one another build the ark that will carry us through the storm. Amen.