

Good Sunday midday from a very chilly, yet sunny hill in Rockport.....

I'm a little late getting out my words today... but here they are, finally.... and it is the first Sunday of Advent! **Here's my question for the day – what is your point of reference?** The Merriam Webster Dictionary tells me a point of reference is “something that is used to judge or understand something else.” As you think about Advent, the holiday season, Christmas, etc., what is/are your points of reference? By that I mean, what experience, thing, person or belief anchors you in this season, keeping in mind in *this* particular year, most if not all bets are off for this holiday season being “normal.” Here's a few of my points of reference to give you a starting point for coming up with your points of reference: my mother's birthday on December 24th-Christmas Eve (I *never* forget it!), Advent readings from scripture (I *am* a preacher!), the color red (it's my *favorite* color!), individuals from my past who are now gone who were important people in my life (and *continue* to be!), and memories of past Christmas's I hold dear (especially from *my childhood!*).

Think on that question in the days to come, and don't forget to work on your “six words describing gratitude.” I've already received my first “submission”! I'll post them all on Christmas Eve.....

Blessings to all on this first Sunday of Advent in the Christian tradition..... Susan

p.s. I will download today's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated's Facebook page....

p.p.s. *AGAIN, thanks so much to those of you who send me your e-mail responses to my writings. I don't always get a chance to write back to each one of you, but I appreciate all your responses! They keep me motivated to continue writing.....*

A simple online worship service for Sunday, November 29, 2020
The first Sunday of Advent
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston

A Call to Worship

We wait this day,
not because we do not know the story of Jesus,
and not because God is not already and always here.
We wait because to wait is to expect something more.

To wait is to expect that the story might enter
our hearts and our world in new ways,
to bring the change for which we long.
We are not together in person this year
to light the first candle of Advent for hope,
but we can light the candle of hope in our hearts,
we can remember the stories of God with us,
when life has been hard,
not what we expected.
We can trust that God *is* with us,
as we wait for hope to be born, anew, in us.
Let us worship God this day,
Not in person, but always in spirit!
Amen.

“A Prayer of the People for the 1st Sunday of Advent”*

For the love of family and friends,
the beauty of this earth,
the invitation of each new day,
and for all that brings hope into the present –
we give thanks, O God.
For ideas that inspire us,
leaders that show wisdom,
events that bring positive change,
and for all that brings hope into the present –
we give thanks, O God.
For stories that have shaped us,
lives that have revealed courage,
moments that have become milestones,
and for all that brought hope into the present –
we give thanks, O God.
For all people and circumstances in our world
where hope is feeble or weary –
we pray for the strength of your presence, O God.
Hope is a gift you have nurtured into the cycle of life.
May we recognize this gift
and allow it to flourish within us
as you walk beside us each day, O God
even as we walk together in spirit this day,
rather than in physical space together.
Amen.

*adapted from a prayer in *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, December 2, 2012

A Reading of Scripture – Isaiah 64:1-9 & Mark 13:24-37

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence –
as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil –
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.
Isaiah 64:1-9

[Jesus says,] “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the power in the heavens will be shaken. 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 heaven.”

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this

generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

“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. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” Mark 13:24-37

A sermon based on Isaiah 64:1-9 & Mark 13:24-37 “Keep awake”

Will you pray with me. O God of Advent and every season, send us your wisdom this day and know that we at least try to keep awake to hear your response in the fleeting, quiet spaces of our lives. Help us to be molded into what you would have us be in these trying and challenging times. Amen.

Well, it’s the Season of Advent – traditionally a time of anticipation and preparation. For Christians that means working our way toward the day we acknowledge as Jesus’ birthday on December 25th. This season means *nothing* to some, a time to remember *better days gone by* to others, and a time to forget *bad days gone by* to even others. Holiday times are not joyful times for everyone. Yet we persist and insist on acknowledging and celebrating them year in and year out. And this particular Advent season is fraught with the challenges and despairs of a pandemic in our midst.... Who could have known last year at this time that we’d be in the deadly predicament that we’re in now? But, thanks to the Bible and its interpreters, we are offered some sage wisdom to help us through this season burdened with as much angst and anger as joy and jolly times.

During Advent, scripture passages from the Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Scriptures are always read. Our reading this morning from Chapter 64 of Isaiah is part of what is considered Third or Trito-Isaiah and is attributed to a prophet or prophets who lived in Judah after the return of the Israelites from Babylonian exile in 539 B.C.E. That is some five hundred years before Jesus was born.

Third Isaiah addresses a brutal time for the Israelites in which economic oppression, harsh living conditions and a resurgence in the pagan rituals long familiar in Israel made life hard and faith in an all-encompassing solo God

something difficult to sustain. In response to this situation, Third Isaiah announces God's imminent judgment on the oppressors and syncretists (those who would combine different forms of ritual practices without examination.) The prophet Isaiah promises that the righteousness of God's glorious deliverance of Israel is soon to be realized. The shame and sorrow of their recent and difficult history will soon be replaced with eternal joy and prosperity.^[1]

Our text from Isaiah today is a prayer of penitence, a prayer of regret, remorse and sorrow, which comes near the end of the Book of Isaiah. Once again, the people have not done right by God, and God has turned away, once again, both mourning the people's faithlessness and longing for their return to faithful living. The prophet comes to speak in the name of God. The prophet delivers social and religious criticism, makes announcements about the future, and takes messages to individual people, but the prophet does not predict the future. The prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures did not see themselves as forecasting the birth of Jesus. "Prophecy, unlike prediction, was understood in Israel to be a way of talking about God's presence, expectations and activity *then* [not at some point down the road.]"^[2]

So why do we read these words at the beginning of the *Christian* Season of Advent? Perhaps it is because they capture both our own yearnings for God to come and change things, and they reveal our hope – the hope we find in God's promises – even though we sometimes wonder if those promises will ever come to fruition, just as the Israelites wondered, too.^[3]

Some of us begin the Season of Advent with faithful and positive eagerness – I try to! But is there also that small part of me that says, "(sigh) Here we go again. What for?"

The final two verses of our passage from Isaiah today answer that question, I think. "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people." (Isaiah 64:8-9) Will we allow ourselves to be molded and remolded into more compassionate and caring people in this Season of Advent and beyond? Can we give up our animosities towards one another and fill up our homes and our hearts with peace and goodwill for all others?

I haven't mentioned our text from the Gospel of Mark yet. Here it comes.... Mark tells us Jesus proclaims, "Keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at

dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (Mark 13:35-37) Perhaps the message from the Gospel of Mark for us in this anxious time of trauma and tribulation in our country is this: “WAKE UP, for God’s sake! WAKE UP! Don’t give up hope! Better days are coming! Live in hope and look everywhere for signs of the holy and wondrous all around us!

Let the people say, “Amen!”

To hold in our prayers this day.....

And hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members....

And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And pray for our President that he might do the right things in coming weeks for the betterment and future of all of us.....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

From a Thomaston resident, please pray for Sean for healing, and for James fighting Covid-19,

Also continued prayers for Ed Lee, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine, ***Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.***

A Benediction

Life is short, no matter the length of our days.

We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make the way with us.

So, be swift to love. Make haste to be kind.

And may the Creator of us all, the Sustainer of us all,

and the Holy Spirit surrounding us all,

be with each of you this day and forever.

Amen.

**Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)
for Sunday, December 6, 2020 – the second Sunday of Advent**

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Words to ponder today about “hope”.....

“Hope is the thing with feathers – that perches in the soul – and sings the tune without the words – and never stops – at all.” ~ Emily Dickinson

“All the great things are simple, and many can be expressed in a single word: freedom, justice, hope, duty, mercy, hope.” ~ Winston Churchill

“Hope smiles from the threshold of the year to come, whispering ‘it will be happier’ ...”

~ Alfred Lord Tennyson

“Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning.” ~ Albert Einstein

“You will be secure, because there is hope; you will look about you and take your rest in safety.” ~ Job 11:18-19

[1]Information taken from *The Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV*, New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1993, p. 1013.

[2]Taken from *Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, p. 12, 2002.

[3] Ibid, with adaptation.