

SUNDAY SERVICE**DECEMBER 4, 2016****“I Never Promised You a Rose Garden”**

I have a least favorite day of the year....it is June 21st. Oh yes, from that day onward light begins to diminish minute by minute until darkness takes over. I really hate losing the sunlight! Not surprisingly, then, that my favorite day of the year is December 21st! Yes, the promise of the return of light to my dark world. Bring it on!

During Advent we tend to focus on the coming light of Christ with the birth of Jesus and the promises of Isaiah in this morning's scripture. But, advent is as much about darkness as it is about light. It is not only about the birth of Jesus but about the end of the world and the Second Coming. There is so much in the scriptural readings of Advent that speak to the theme of “Watch, Awake, Be Ready” for you do not know the timing of the Second Coming. And so, the parable of the virgins and oil lamps. And, those who are not ready or are asleep will find themselves judged as wanting at the end of time. For many of us, the

events of the past several years with increased violence and hate crimes makes us wonder if we have been asleep and that the end of the world as we thought we knew it has come. Here we were, seeking to follow the admonition to “prepare you the way of the Lord...to make straight in the desert a highway for our Lord,” and “the crooked will be made straight and the rough places plain.” Right! Wrong! We are lost, once again, wandering in the desert with the highway hidden from us.

Isaiah’s words about the “wolf living with the lamb” and the “lion laying down with the kid” feel like so many empty promises. And, “He will strike the country with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips bring death to the wicked” feel like cruel words of betrayal. We are not the wicked ones!!! We are not the evil ones. We are the “rainbow” ones! The ones trying to live out the teachings of Jesus. And, where is God in all of this?

How do we reconcile our hearts with what has happened in the past two years? I have reflected deeply on this for myself. The words, “I never promised you a Rose Garden” came to me spontaneously and the more I have pondered this, the more I have come to believe that we were born for this. We were born into this time, this very moment, for a reason and a purpose. And that reason and purpose has

much to do with hope, with light and with constancy. In this time of uncertainty with rising violence against those ones Jesus embraced the most, we need to be present, standing firm in the way Jesus would have us stand. We need to embrace visibly all those who are or feel the most threatened by this new world.

And what about our personal “end-time” moments...those moments we learn of a potentially “terminal” diagnosis. The loss of our spouse, our children, our family, our friends, ourselves. Those moments which turn our lives upside down—a difficult divorce, a betrayal. At that moment our world has ended and we are lost.

What we thought and expected to be has been blown wide apart. How do we stand firm in ourselves when even the most devout among us, still ask in their hearts the question: “Lord, what did I do wrong to deserve this?”

What does Advent and the Second Coming have to say to us? How do we pass through the darkness of our nights?

There are many different interpretations of the Second Coming from the apocalyptic Day of Judgment and the separation of the wheat from the chaff, to Christ being taken up into the clouds, to the Kingdom of God on earth when we will “beat our swords into ploughshares and our swords into pruning hooks” to the incarnation of Christ in each one of us.

Now I, personally, am partial to this last understanding for it does not require waiting for the future—some end-time—or on something out there, something cataclysmic, to bring God back into the world. Indeed, in this interpretation “the kingdom of God is among us” now and all we need do is embrace it and live it. Which means we must always be awake. We must always be prepared to live from that space in which we experience God in us. God has been there and has been in us all along. The second coming is the simple, but radical, recognition of this truth.

This is not to say that evil will disappear from the earth. As Roger Sessions writes, “God does not promise us a life without evil. The Bible is filled with stories of terrible evil being visited upon the most holy of innocents. What God promises us is the ability to transform even the worst evil into the greatest good.” It is not that transformation occurs overnight necessarily. First, it must occur in our own hearts....those of us who so desire it....and then it moves out beyond to touch the hearts of others. It moves through our words, through our embraces, through our public stances, through our trust and lack of fear, through our great love and caring.

But what brings us to that moment? I would call it the mystery of God and it appears to be different for each one of us. It comes when we least expect it. In conversation with a friend, or with a stranger; in the reading of a poem or the hearing of a piece of music; or the rising or setting of the sun; the words of a child or a homeless man's "God Bless You", working the Bazaar, being touched by someone in this church to whom we believe we are ministering but turns out we are the ones receiving the gift. Moments that change us and bring us back to life, filling our weary hearts and souls with light. We have experienced such moments ourselves and we have seen those moments of rebirth in others even as we cannot explain the mystery of it. The very experience of the Second Coming within us again and again.

And that brings me to the Advent wreath. As I shared with the children, the peasants in medieval times removed the wheels from their carts, took one indoors and decorated it. With that they slowed down and lived with the darkness, going within, as so much of the animal and natural world does during the winter. A time of hibernation for the body and the soul. And with the emergence of light, a renewed sense of energy, activity, and hope. bring a tire

This year, in particular, we would do well to heed the gifts of darkness to renew ourselves, to see that **we** are the Second Coming and we are here now to live a life in which God is incarnate in and through each one of us. It is hard to imagine the benefits that would accrue to us individually and collectively if we would remove just one, just one tire from our cars to bring inside and decorate. Gone the distractions; space for the real meaning of God incarnate. Space to rest our weary hearts and souls...and our weary bones. Space to fill ourselves up again with hope and with light. Space for the preparation to go forth in **this** time, **this** moment into the world to to heal and to be healed; to offer and to receive comfort; to stand with and for all humanity filled with the love that is God; to be the Second Coming as crazy as that may sound!

In conclusion I want to share a favorite Advent poem of mine by Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Christ climbed down
From his bare Tree
This year
And ran away to where
There were no rootless Christmas trees
Hung with candycanes and breakable stars

Christ climbed down
From his bare Tree
This year
And ran away to where
There were no gilded Christmas trees
And no tinsel Christmas trees
And no pink plastic Christmas trees
And no gold Christmas trees
And no black Christmas trees
And no powderblue Christmas trees
Hung with electric candles
And encircled by tin electric trains
And clever cornball relatives

Christ climbed down
From his bare Tree
This year
And ran away to where
No intrepid Bible salesmen
Covered the territory
In two-one cadillacs
And where no Sears Roebuck creches
Comp-lete with plastic babe in manger
Arrived by parcel post
The babe by special delivery

And where no televised Wise Men
Praised the Lord Calvert Whiskey

Christ climbed down
From his bare Tree
This year and ran away to where
No fat handshaking stranger
In a red flannel suit
And a fake white beard
Went around passing himself off
As some sort of North Pole saint
Crossing the desert to Bethlehem
Pennsylvania
In a Volkswagen sled
Drawn by rollicking Adirondack reindeer
With German names
And bearing sacks of Humble Gifts
From Saks Fifth Avenue
For everybody's imagined Christ child

Christ climbed down
From his bare Tree
This year
And ran away to where
No Bing Crosby carolers
Groaned of a tight Christmas

And where no Radio City angels
Iceskated wingless
Thru a winter wonderland
Into a jinglebell heaven
Daily at 8:30
With Midnight Mass matinees

Christ climbed down
From his bare Tree
This year and softly stole away into
Some anonymous soul
He waits again
An unimaginable
And impossibly
Immaculate Reconciliation
The very craziest
Of Second Comings

And, so, I say to you "Be The Church" ..."Be The Light" ..."Be the Hope"Be The
Second Coming". Amen.