

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
November 30, 2014 – Advent 1B**

**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Texts – Isaiah 64: 1-9 & Mark 13: 24-37**

This day. This day as the first candle of the Advent wreath is lighted, we enter into a special kind of time. It is a time out of time, a time beyond time, really, encompassing all that has been, all that will be, and all that is. It is a season that is probably the most different from that in place in our society. There, the Christmas holiday – or at least its preparation and anticipation – is well underway. The lights are twinkling on buildings and bushes, on busy thoroughfares and country roads. The songs and commercials surround us, encouraging us to make this the best Christmas ever – by buying, and baking, and wrapping until we are ready to drop.

Here, the mood is subdued, introspective. The colors of Sarum blue speak of hope. There is waiting and anticipation, too. But not merely waiting for the great celebration of Christ's birth. There is that, of course. But the anticipation is wider and deeper. It speaks of longing and comfort – the time when God's realm will be fulfilled and when peace and justice will truly reign. And it spans these 2,000 years since the birth and 2,000 years before that, perhaps the hopes and dreams of all people since creation.

And we live in both of these seasons, at the same time, don't we? This coming week is a perfect example: the United Churches Christmas Concert on Wednesday, that will be filled with Christmas music to continue the launch of the holiday season. Then, on Saturday, the invitation to the Advent retreat here a Grace, a time to be quiet and ponder. To listen. And hope.

Our music reflects this time difference, doesn't it? "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," an ancient chant that speaks of the longing for release from exile – long before Christ, an early expression of the need for deliverance.

And our opening hymn, that leaps forward, "Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending," imagery of the second coming, and all that has led to it with Christ.

Throughout Advent, we move slowly, maybe deliberately, as the salvation history opens bit by bit and, at the same time is wrapped in that longer and older story. This first Sunday is one of lament and despair. The Psalmist tells of a sense of loss and abandonment by a God who showed love in the past. It was likely the time of the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, after the united kingdom of David and Solomon had unraveled.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of a deliverance – the Persian King Cyrus had released the people of Israel from exile and allowed them to return to Jerusalem. Some thought Cyrus was the awaited Messiah. But when a small group made the trip back to Jerusalem, what they found was not the home they had known. It had been desecrated, and they despaired – and wondered where God was. They begged God to act like God: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!” they said, “come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.”

And yet, running through both of these stories is a hope, an assurance. They recall what God has done for them. They believe, they hope, that God will hear their cries, will answer and restore them. They confess the hope that God’s mercy will shine on them once more.

In our Gospel, Mark writes well after Jesus’ death and resurrection, in or immediately after a time of siege – for a community that has been oppressed and persecuted by Roman powers, rejected by the synagogues, living in great uncertainty. The writer of Mark paints the vision: “But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken...The Son of Man [will come] in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.” They were called upon to wait, to know that God’s time is not ours, to remember the promises of Christ and wait with certainty and hope.

All of these images are signs of how God could or should act in the world. In our own time, we are not so different from these people, are we? Wouldn’t we sometimes like some signs, too? In our world where we are constantly alert for terror, for gun violence, we fear, much of this fueled by the injustice and economic disparities that are out of control. Wouldn’t we sometimes like to cry out to God, “come down to make your name known; cause the nations to quake before you!”?

In the meantime, Mark admonishes us, too, to stay awake. Not just to snooze while waiting. No, this is an active waiting, one where our eyes and hearts are open to the possibility of the in-breaking of God. Or to where God is already breaking in, whether we notice or not. This is not easy in our world where there is little silence and waiting seems a thing of the past given our virtually instant communication. Sometimes we go to “sleep,” become numb because of the bombardment of information, the overload of suffering around us – we can’t take it in, so we nod off, and make our world small and secure. Sometimes, we think we need only ourselves and our technology. Surely, “there’s an app for that,” whatever challenge we encounter. Sometimes we sleep through Advent. It’s easier to go with the flow – jump into the frenzy, the over consumption, the overeating and over partying, hoping that *this* year everything will be perfect. Just like the best Christmas in our memories.

Hope is a funny thing, isn’t it? “Hope gets mixed up with a longing for the past, looking backward to the restoration of life as we once knew it” (Tabitha Arnold). But, you see, God’s

hope looks ahead. Advent reminds us that we must wait, without answers. God answers, but not as we expect.

Whether we want it or not, we do need Advent. We need to wake up, both individually and collectively as a church. We need to reconnect with each other and the world. The coming of God's realm has a lot to do with us—how we wait, how we live while we wait. *We* are needed to help bring about that realm. Not just by talking *about* Jesus' ministry or example. Not just by talking *about* loving God and neighbor. But by *living* these things. By having the courage to look forward and hope in what cannot be seen, knowing that hope and new possibility emerge from darkness. That the light breaks through where it is least expected. And we can be that light, shining it on all whom we encounter.

So—this Advent, let us slow down and wait with expectation—make the time to be able to recognize the in-breaking of God into our lives and world. Find times and places where you can wait and anticipate in small snatches. Maybe it will be in the Christmas concerts and services and the glorious music of the season. Maybe it will be right here in this church—with the blue Advent paraments, the candles, the lighting of the Advent wreath. Maybe it will be in gatherings around a table in the faces of friends, family, strangers. Maybe it will be on the street, where someone seeks food or warm clothing or a place of shelter. Possibly in all of these will we see a glimpse of God's realm and the light of hope that will scatter the darkness. May it be so with you.

Amen.