

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, November 29, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
A Time of Hopeful Waiting

Advent – a Time of Hopeful Waiting – calls us to expect something new to happen in our lives. To be open to the possibilities that our spirits, our bodies and our minds might be more deeply devoted to living out our Christian faith because Jesus is coming into our lives once again this Christmas.

Biblical commentator, Kathy Beach-Verhey, says, *“The good news of Advent is not simply that Christ is coming, but that his coming means we can hope, despite all that is falling apart in our lives, our communities, and the world around us... Advent offers us expectation and hope for something new.”*¹

We are also called to actively partner with God in bringing about this transformation in our lives. Advent is not just about waiting; it is also about preparation – A Time of Hopeful Preparation. What is it you hope for in this new church year? As individuals we hope for healing from illness, we hope for recovery from injuries, surgeries and side effects from treatments; we hope for our grief to subside; we hope for continuing good health; we hope for the ability to adapt to chronic illnesses and the effects of aging; we hope for the social, educational and spiritual development of our children – especially for the one baptized here today, for all those who have been baptized here throughout the history of this church, for all of our baptisms, and for all those who are entrusted in our care; we hope for the ability to end hurtful relationships, the ability to engage in new relationships, and the ability to deepen existing relationships; and we hope for even more in our individual aspirations.

What are the preparations that we called to, individually, during this Advent season – A Time of Hopeful Preparation? We are called to be present rather than to be in denial; we are called to be honest with ourselves and with others; we are called to be direct in communication; we are called to nurture our bodies in healthy ways rather than in abusive ways; we are called to be constantly in prayer; we are called to greater faithfulness in our personal faith journey. May we use this Advent Season as a time to both reflect upon our hopes and to deepen our commitment to partner with God in bringing about these transformations?

We gather together, today, on the First Sunday of Advent, not just as individuals and families with individual hopes and preparations for future transformations; but we gather together, today, on the First Sunday of Advent, as a faith community with our communal hopes and our preparations for the transformation of this faith community.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

As a faith community, during this coming year, we hope to come to an agreement on specific goals for living into our Mission and Vision; we hope to align our ministries and church governance with our goals; we hope to address the physical needs of our building to both make needed repairs and to transform it into a more welcoming gathering center; and we hope to celebrate the call of a new settled pastor. One of the “we will” statements proposed during our all-church SUMMIT on November 8 beautifully captures additional hopes for the future of this faith community. It reads: “We will grow and thrive spiritually, economically and in membership.” I believe that these hopes are not just our hopes, but are also God’s hope for this faith community.

So what do we make of the apocalyptic visions in today’s gospel text? Jesus speaks of the earth in distress, the seas roaring, and people fainting from fear as signs of the end times. He also prophesizes: “this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place”. Biblical Commentator, Wesley D. Avram, says the following: *“The reality is this: anything can happen at any moment—and in one way or another everything is happening in every moment. There is no present moment to which one can cling, and change is not limited by predictability and control.”*² I agree with Avram and propose that, rather than repeating the fear-based predictions for the end times as many preachers would have us to do, we need to live fully in the present, to not live in fear and to do what Jesus asked us to do in the time of the apocalypse. Jesus said, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:28). We are called not to just hope for our redemption, but to stand up, raise our heads, and prepare for it by actively participating in God’s hope for the future.

Our Old Testament text from Jeremiah gives us a most powerful Advent hope - not only for this faith community and its outreach ministries, but also for the entire Christian community - in the form of a promise from God. Jeremiah says, *“I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”* (Jeremiah 33: 16) Do we dare to even give expression to this hope that justice and righteousness might prevail - not at the end of times, but during our lifetime?

Biblical Commentator, Gary W. Charles provides a one vision of what executing justice and righteousness in the land might look like: *“As I listen to the cries of Jeremiah throughout the scope of his prophecy, I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future will be a reality...when in God's future the poor are not sent to shelters or forced to sleep on the streets... when we will stop producing body bags—because there are no dead soldiers to fill them... when God's future affords no room for rancor, a day when our world is no longer torn asunder by racism and sexism and homophobia.”*³

This Advent season is a time of Hopeful Waiting and Hopeful Preparation for just such a time of executing justice and righteousness in the land - through increasing our outreach

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

³ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

efforts, through joining in partnership with other communities of faith to widen our outreach impact, through deepening our covenant with the United Church of Christ and its justice and witness ministries; through deepening our covenant with the United Church of Christ and its Global Ministries; and through ways that we have not yet imagined and that God has not yet revealed to us. May God continue to provide this faith community with the vision of a better future for our communities and for the world. May it be so. Amen.