



First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2017, St. Paul's On-The-Hill Church

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My eight-year-old daughter is keenly aware of the issue of climate change. She quite regularly asks me, "Have we taken care of that problem yet?"

The frightening imagery in our gospel lesson is probably quite like the content of her fears, as I have heard her describe them:

*"... in those days ... the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." (Mark 13:24-25)*

It is distressing for me as a father. I want to be truthful and hopeful at the same time.

As I reflected on this it struck me that this very much captures the position we are invited to take during Advent. As Isaiah says, if we are truthful there is no denying the deteriorated states into which we have fallen personally. And as Mark says, if we are truthful we have every reason to expect calamity with respect to the fate of the earth.

But both Isaiah and Mark extend hope. Isaiah actually reminds God, and reminds us, that God is our creator: "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isaiah 64:8). We continue in God's image and likeness, regardless of our transgressions. And Mark reminds us that any calamity into which our planet falls is not the end of the story - that Christ will come to redeem and transform the world:

*"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. 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."
(Mark 13:26-27)*

So our challenge is to be honest with ourselves about the state of our own souls and the state of the world, while embracing the hope that the end of the story both of each of us individually and of the creation itself will be written by God.

While both the personal and the collective are Advent concerns, Advent gives more emphasis to the personal. Remembering that we are each God's creations allows us to reflect on what kind of stewards we have been of this incredible gift. Advent is a time for personal inventory. In what ways are we Christ-like presences in the world, living reminders of what God is like? And in what parts of our lives is it unlikely that we are reminding anyone of the truth of what God is like?

This kind of reflection will clarify what needs changing in our inner lives and in our relationships with others. It should also get us thinking about our stewardship of the earth. If each one of us is a part of God's creation, shouldn't we be caring for creation in the same way we are caring for ourselves and for others? How well does our lifestyle meet this standard?

Asking and answering these kinds of questions can and should result in very concrete decisions to make changes in our lives: internally, in our relationships, and in how we care for the earth. Mark makes it very clear that we need to stay watchful and wakeful: even as we plumb the depths of our souls, there is ministry to be done and a life of faith to be lived out in as disciplined and intentional a way as possible.

But as we make these changes in our lives - as we seek to minister better, to live out our faith more fully - we are also reconnected in Advent with the truth that our task is not to succeed but to be faithful. It is God who will bring each of us, each of our relationships, and all of creation, to fruition. Our job is to be as faithful as possible to God's will and purposes for us and for the world until Christ comes to make all things new.

So the answer to my daughter's question about climate change is no, we haven't solved that problem yet. I must be truthful with her. But Advent reminds me that there is no harsh truth that is not accompanied by hope. God will solve that problem, and all problems, finally and ultimately. Our job, until he does, is to try our best, and to be our best.

And just to elaborate on that last point: embracing the hope of Advent is not in any way to say that our efforts are not meaningful or important as we seek as a human family to be better individuals, better spouses, better parents, better friends, better brothers and sisters in Christ, better stewards of creation. Our efforts are essential. And our efforts often result in major changes for the better. I want my daughter to know this.

It's just that most of all, I want her to know that the One who loves us best will make up the difference where our efforts have fallen short. May our faith in this wonderful truth grow throughout this Advent season, that we may greet the Lord with transformed hearts when he comes.