

Happy New Year!

And I mean that sincerely. Today we find ourselves in a new year of the Church season, a calendar removed from our worldly patterns of marking time and attuned to our desire to seek and worship God. Today marks the beginning of a new year in worship and a new cycle in our life together as a community of believers.

Advent has always been one of my favorite times of year. Out of all the seasons of the Church, this is the one we really *feel*. The days get shorter and colder. Wreathes and tinsel—which have been slowly taking over houses and streets and businesses since Halloween wrapped up—get tired of half measures and take over everything. Christmas music is everywhere—which is a mixed blessing, especially with some of the more obnoxious covers out there.

Advent is a confusing season to like. I know that I'm supposed to hate the commodification of the holiday, but I confess that I like seeing greenery and reindeer and Santas in all the shop windows. I like being reminded of Christmas every time I go shopping. It's a contradiction, I know, and Advent is a season of contradictions. It's a season that means different things to different people. A time of hope and fear. A time of anticipation and anxiety. A time of contemplation and a time of hyper-business as we rush to put up decorations and purchase gifts, to prepare for holiday travels or for welcoming travelers into our homes.

It's not an easy time. In fact it's a messy time, in which we look for a baby to be born while also knowing that the baby has already been born and is still being born in us—a God who came and is coming and is among us right now. And if we take the time to slow down, breathe, and really listen, God speaks to us in the messiness.

When we get past all of the glitz and commercial holiday cheer, Advent can be a bleak, lonely season, full of anxiety and uncertainty. We look back on the year that has passed and wonder about the things we've attempted, accomplished, or failed to accomplish. We look ahead to the New Year and worry about challenges waiting just over the horizon. Advent is a time of the already and not yet, a time of expectation and hope amid the darkness and the shadows.

As Christians, when confronted by the darkness we can utter only one response: "Come, Lord Jesus."

Come, Lord Jesus. The one who was, and is, and is to come. The Church seasons model the movements of faith. Christ has come—Jesus was born, in a lowly stable in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago. That fact doesn't change with the season. Christ isn't "unborn" in these weeks leading up to Christmas any more than he is "dead" in the days between Good Friday and Easter. But the movements of the Church bring us outside of time as we usually understand it.

In this strange season of Advent we look back and experience the hope of the prophets and ancient Israelites awaiting the Messiah's coming even as we look forward as the Church towards Christ's return. The uncertainties of winter and the vagaries of our own lives turn our minds toward the eternal certainty of God.

So it is that we light our first Advent candle with a mix of hope, fear, uncertainty, and joy. We kneel with the prophet Jeremiah in the ashes of Jerusalem, yearning for the day when God's chosen king will come to rule with justice and righteousness. And we stand with Saint Paul, rejoicing in the spiritual blessings of the believers in Thessalonica. And we sit at the feet of Christ, listening to God's promise of a kingdom to come.

Jeremiah's call in our readings today is especially poignant, rising from the ruins of God's broken people to predict the ultimate triumph of righteousness and justice. Jeremiah prophesies that the days of Godly justice "are surely coming" even when the triumph of a godless world are assured. Though all striving seems in vain, God's righteousness will be fulfilled in Good time.

And Thessalonians calls for us to remember that the righteousness of God is being fulfilled, not in some far-off apocalyptic future but within each of us at this very moment. The movement of Advent is about more than expectation. It is about preparation for the coming of God. That is the point of our life and work together: the steady fulfillment of the Kingdom of God.

On this, the first day of our Church New Year, think back on what God has accomplished in you this year. Think of the love of God manifested in your life and the lives of your loved ones. Know that the work of the kingdom continues with you and goes out with you beyond these walls and out into the world. And once you have put a finger on the love God has worked with you, share that love with family and friends. In this season of lengthening darkness and artificial light, be the light of Christ in a world that so desperately needs it.

And heed the words of Jesus as Our Lord calls us to look towards the future. Think about what you will accomplish this year. Think of the challenges that face you and pray for God's help in overcoming them. Fortify yourselves for this next year, the next leg in our long journeys, and think about how to deepen your faith so that you will be a different person this time next year.

For we are always changing, always growing, always experiencing the joyful work of God in our lives.

And know that you are not alone in any of these endeavors. We do the work of discipleship together, in community. Your work of discipleship is reflected in the work of the Good Shepherd community. Think and rejoice in the good work you did this past year. We are blessed by your faithful work, from the Daughters of the King and our men's ministry, Feed a Family, youth education, the year-round food ministry, the work of our music ministry and rental ministry and so many other ways this church impacts the surrounding communities...

This is the work of discipleship. The work that is accomplished through faith and labor and love and prayer. Let us give thanks to God for all that has been accomplished through us and all that has been accomplished on our behalf. And then let us prepare for the work we are called to do this coming year.

Advent is a time of marvelous contradictions. Of looking back on the past and looking on towards the future, all while remaining true to a present moment that calls for us to labor on in the time that we have been given.

This season, open your hearts to the love of God that flows out and gives life to all creation. As we wait in hopeful expectation for the coming of Christ's kingdom, work to build that kingdom now in your homes and your families and your communities. Be open to all that was and is and is to come.

Be alert, joyfully awaiting the coming kingdom, prepared to raise up your heads as our redemption draws near. Jesus is with us in this season of hope and anticipation. Feel that presence and share it with others. In this time of darkness and cold, let yourselves and the whole Church radiate God's light and warmth.

Happy New Year! May this season of worship be one of hope, joy, and a preparation for great things yet to come.