

“We are an Advent people”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and Luke 1:46-55

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Earlier this month, in a Presbyterian Facebook group, a gentleman posted a meme, saying “Christmas season starts the day after Thanksgiving... FALSE: The Christmas season is known as Advent, which begins on December 2nd.”

Now, in many contexts this may have gone without comment, but unfortunately this gentleman had chosen Presbyterians for his audience. A choice, I am sure, he now regrets. For these were not just any Presbyterians. These were Presbyterians who chose to belong to a Facebook group celebrating their love of everything Presbyterian. A most dreaded and cantankerous sort, the kind of people who read their Book of Order for fun, brand their children with middle names like Calvin and Knox, and ruin parties by dividing the partygoers into those predestined for cake and those predestined for no cake.

I know. It’s the stuff of nightmares.

First, people pointed out that the meme was a year old and that Advent actually began on December 3rd. Then, people shouted in all caps that Advent is NOT the season of Christmas, but is the season leading up to Christmas. Then they started arguing about whether churches should celebrate Advent a week early this year in order to avoid having the 4th Sunday of Advent land on Christmas Eve, which of course is the equivalent of a cluster bomb in the Presbyterian world. Then came the debates about when it’s appropriate to start your Christmas shopping, or put up your decorations, or sing Christmas carols. After all, no one really likes all those dreary Advent hymns anyway! One person proudly announced that he had put up Christmas decorations in September—after which, of course, he was scourged and banished.

Personally, I can’t blame the world for wanting to rush ahead to Christmas. Christmas is happy. We open presents and sing carols. It’s when all that we’ve been hoping for becomes reality: the Christ child is born and we are saved. Living through Advent, on the other hand, is tough. You’re stuck waiting for something that, for all you know, may never happen. The nights grow darker, longer, and each day, the manger is still empty.

In our texts today, both Isaiah and Mary find themselves living in a time when God’s promises seem like little more than pipe dreams.

At this point in the Book of Isaiah, the Israelites have returned home, after years of exile, only to find their land in ruins. They try to rebuild. But everything they do just seems to end in failure. This was supposed to be the promised return to glory. Instead, the same old economic injustices and political divisions are taking over. People are starting to give up.

And now, hundreds of years later, an angel appears to an unwed teenage mother, living in the rural hills of Palestine, and tells her that God has promised to bless her and to change the world through her. But the world she sees doesn't look like it's changing. The religious elite still snub people like her. The Roman Empire still rules with iron and shield. The poor are still hungry, and the rich still don't care.

Isaiah and Mary hear talk of hope, but all they see are ruins. There are a lot of things in ruins these days. "Economies. Jobs. Lives. Marriages. Childhoods. Education."¹ We see loved ones, once so vibrant, slipping away because of illness or age. We see a church, once full and bustling, now empty and captive to fear and a changing culture. We see a democracy in crisis—and a world enthralled with greed and power, consumed by violence and poverty, unashamed of its objectification and harassment of women, held under the dominion of racism and bigotry.

We may ask why we were born into such times. We may wish that none of this had ever happened, that we could go back to the time when we were innocent of this grief—or maybe just rush ahead to the happy ending of Christmas. We don't want to be here in Advent, when God's promises seem so far off.

Karl Marx once described Christianity as an opium of the people, meant to dull our senses to the pain and injustice around us, to blunt the sharp uncertainty of Advent. And perhaps he would be right if the Bible did indeed rush to Christmas. But Marx was wrong. Because what we see today in the prophet Isaiah, and the prophet Mary, are no cowering servants to illusion. We see a man, and a woman, who do not retreat but meet the reality of life head on. They tell a story of exile and struggle, and of a God who—far from whisking them out of reality—plants them squarely there, amid the ruins, that they, like relentless roses through cracked stone, would push, push, and push, till those ruins are rebuilt and God is visible to all.

God tells Isaiah and Mary that they were made for such a time as this. Appointed, anointed, called—they are the prophets of a God who does not give up. The prophets of Advent.

And so, they praise God, even when there's nothing yet visible to praise. They sing, even when there is no song to be had, because they see the world not only as it is, but also as it will be. As it should be.

A world where the grieving are comforted, where the oppressed are redeemed, where ruined cities rise from the ashes, where the year of Jubilee is proclaimed. A year when, according to the Jewish Law, all debts are canceled, all slaves set free, all property returned to its original owners.

A world of mercy, where God scatters the proud and brings the powerful down from their thrones, where God lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. A world where ruins become the seat of God's glory. Where the unwed pregnant girl becomes the mother of God.

Isaiah and Mary fight for this world. And not just them, but every homeless and incarcerated person, every worshiper in every empty cathedral, every man who won't stop praying, every

¹ Rick Morley

woman who won't stop protesting, every person who won't stop loving, every first responder who plunges in, every caretaker of the aging and the dying, every refugee at the border, every woman declaring "Me Too"—all Emmanuel, Jesus coming to us. The heralds of Advent.

Isaiah and Mary rejoice because this calling isn't a burden; it is a blessing. It is a chance to live and work for something that matters, for the only thing that matters. A chance to prepare the way of Christ.

For Jesus isn't born into the golden days. Jesus is born into the troubled days of ruin.

Why then would we long for any time but now?

God has placed us here, so that, through us, God might repair these ruined lives and cities. To be an Advent people is to live during in-between times, hard times, and to be called restorers of the breach.

We are the poets of tomorrow. The shepherds telling everyone, the mother singing, the angel announcing, the child leaping, the star pointing. God is coming.

So let us sing, like Isaiah, like Mary. Let us sing our Advent song.

I hear this singing as Chapel House expands housing for the homeless in Auburn. I hear this singing as deacons take the hands of our shut-ins, as the grieving declare their faith at each funeral, as a 98-year-old woman with a broken hip smiles in prayer, as you gather to worship even when there seems to be no reason to give praise. I hear this singing as members of our church partner to create Cayuga County's first safe space for LGBTQ teens. I hear this singing as Bob and Bev Miller revive a musical to teach us about hate and love. I hear this singing as Auburn makes plans to embody Rev. Dr. King's vision of a beloved community driven by racial justice and the Poor People's Campaign. I hear this singing as we prepare to serve the hungry on Christmas Eve at the Salvation Army Miracle Kitchen.

I heard this singing when I watched fellow religious leaders being arrested 10 days ago in Maine for praying outside their senator's office and refusing to leave, in protest of a tax bill they deem immoral, and which they and others fear will ultimately deepen the vulnerability of America's low- and middle-income families. I saw among them my friend, the man who gave me my charge during my installation as your pastor, the Rev. Dr. James Gertmenian. I heard them kneeling and singing "This Little Light of Mine" as they were handcuffed.

They didn't change the senator's vote. But they sang anyway. Because they are an Advent people. And so are we.

We are the eyes through which God looks hope upon these ruins. **Amen.**