

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the blessings of Advent to you all. The theme for this year's Wednesday services is "What do you fear? Insisting on hope this Advent." You are all familiar with the idea of Advent as a time of expectation and hope, as we wait for a Savior to be born in Bethlehem. We synchronize our vigil with the natural year, counting nights of darkness before the days begin to grow longer again at Christmas. We may even make friends with the dark.

But in order for hope to take deep root in us, I believe we have to be unremittingly honest about the forces that tend to rob us of hope, that lead us in the direction of despair. And thus the gospel readings of Advent do not feature carol-ready lullabies or sweet baby animals, but gritty, sometimes challenging themes. Like today's gospel.

But first a story. A judge walks into a courtroom and sternly admonishes the two contending lawyers: "I am shocked that both of you have offered me a bribe to decide this case in your favor. Mr. Smith, you gave me \$40,000, and Ms. Jones, you have given me \$50,000. But I'll have you know that I am not to be swayed in this fashion." He hands \$10,000 back to Ms. Jones, and says, "Now that you're even, I will decide this case on its merits." Just a little judicial humor, which tells us something about who we imagine judges to be.

Let's try this axiom on for size. Evangelical Christians tend to preach the idea of judgment but not the idea of justice. Are you with me so far? Progressive Christians, on the other hand, tend to favor justice and not judgment. That sounds nice, right? But before we dislocate our shoulders patting ourselves on the back, let's examine this more closely.

How, do we suppose, does justice come about without discernment or judging? Whose justice would that be? How would we know what *is* just without some higher judgment? And why do we get so frightened when we think about God as judge, since we know God to be loving and merciful?

This is the conundrum that weaves together the readings from today's lectionary. First, the good news. We see in Isaiah that God's justice will bring peace to the world:

"[God] shall judge between the nations

and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;  
neither shall they learn war any more.

So God sits in benevolent judgment among all peoples, fairer and certainly more incorruptible than the judge in my joke. But I think many of us are still waiting for the other shoe to drop. We expect punishment rather than grace, wrath instead of lovingkindness. And when we bring those expectations to a text like today's reading from Matthew, we see a God whose judgment seems truly fearsome.

Jesus says, "For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so, too, will be the coming of the Son of Man." Naturally, the hearer puts herself into the shoes of all those swept away by flash floods, rising waters, houses collapsing in the Outer Banks. Is that the kind of catastrophe coming for those who aren't "awake"?

I mean, let me be clear: we need to be honest about the things we have done and the things we have left undone. We each play a part in the ways that the world is not what it should be, and Advent is in part a penitential season.

But even if you think of God as the kind of God who sends calamity, in the very passage Jesus references, Noah's story in Genesis 9:11, God promises "never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." Jesus must have something else in mind. Two workers in the field together, two women grinding meal: one is taken and the other left. But aren't these examples just the way we know life to be? Change comes suddenly sometimes, without our permission and certainly beyond our control. One day you are visiting with your dear friend, and the next day, or so it seems, they are gone—a car crash or a heart attack, it almost doesn't matter which. Is that the way God's judgment operates? To punish the one and not the other? Of course not. If your house is broken into while you're sleeping, are you at fault? Of course not.

Rather, Jesus asks us to think about all the ways we sometimes sleepwalk through our lives. If you knew today were the last day you would see your nephew, your cousin, your best friend, what would you do differently? If you knew your vote would decide the election, or your letter tip your legislator's vote, wouldn't you go out of your way? Am I awake to my "one wild and precious life"?

Poet David Whyte writes that "gratitude is not a passive response to something we have been given, gratitude arises from paying attention, from being awake in the presence of everything that lives within and without us." As we put the Thanksgiving holiday in our rear view and head toward the hullabaloo of Christmas, one of the best ways to continue a practice of thanksgiving and gratitude is to pay attention: to the tree branches bowed under snow, to the warmth of company on a winter's day, to the little miracles that attend every day.

And then staying "woke" means not "Jesus is coming; look busy" but rather making ready for him to come, the way we would welcome a guest. It's always struck me as remarkable that "Joy to the World" is listed as an Advent hymn in the ELW rather than as a Christmas carol. But listen to these words: "Let every heart prepare him room." That, I think, is the chief work of Advent: first to tell the truth about the conditions under which we live, and then to make space for Love to come in and transform everything.

In the same way we long for all to be made well in the world, for peace and justice to reign, we long for God's perfect and merciful judgment, because they are one and the same. Yes, change is coming, deep change. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.