

Imagining a New World: An Advent Devotional

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INTRODUCTION

2020 has been a challenging year in the life of our families, the church, and the world. The global COVID-19 pandemic has brought changes, sickness, death, and disruption unlike anything in most of our lifetimes. We simply could not have anticipated these circumstances, and as I write, we do not really know what the world will look like in Advent 2020. While we miss what was, we realize that the world will never be quite the same again. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are now called to imagine a new world, and who we will be as church in it.

On February 23, 2020, I gave the “State of the Church” address to the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I told the board that we must have the courage to imagine not only a new church for a new world, but how we as church could help to shape that world. I said we needed to give ourselves permission to change, to let go of processes, structures, and even practices, emboldening ourselves to try and explore new understandings of ministry. Even more importantly, Jesus called for change in his ministry on earth. The early church itself was born in the midst of radical change: crucifixion, resurrection, and Pentecost were all moments of massive disruption for those earliest followers of Christ. Finally, I said, we must let go of the fear of what will happen when we do change. God has not given us a spirit of fear but of love, power, and confidence.

Little did I know that only three weeks later the COVID-19 pandemic would hand us a new world. Some of us began working remotely. Congregations could not worship in person, and we had to learn how to worship, care for, and connect with each other in new ways. We have had to re-evaluate the use and value of our buildings. We have had to find ways to connect and sustain relationships on Zoom, Facebook, and YouTube. We have been unable to care for the sick and comfort the bereaved with our

physical presence. Celebrations of life have been re-imagined because we cannot gather. We have had to name the added stress and exhaustion that life in a pandemic has brought to us and to focus on self-care for ourselves and others. Most importantly, we have had to call on God to teach us, guide us, encourage us, and help us imagine new ways to live out God's love and witness for justice and peace from beyond our four walls.

In each of these devotionals, I have tried to invite us into a space of courageous and prophetic imagination. When we embrace Jesus as God in our midst, who then must we be? How then must we love? What then must we do? Walter Brueggemann reminds us: "the imagination must come before the implementation." As you enter into this season of anticipation and expectation, may the Spirit feed your heart, mind and spirit as we imagine a new church in this new world, called by God, grounded in love, and enlightened by the Word.

First Week of Advent



The Urgency of Now

Read Isaiah 64:1–9

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence. (Isaiah 64:1–2)*

Isaiah speaks to God on behalf of a people who have run out of time, a people who need God to show up—NOW! Living under the oppression of Rome, holding fast to the promise of a Messiah, they are impatient for the promise to be fulfilled. They want God to show up in ways that would cause fire to burn wood and boil water! They need God to move as never before, and the prophet calls for God to do it in ways that people will take notice.

Like the Israelites, many communities today live constantly on the edge of enough, marginalized and living with constant and multiple traumas of poverty and oppression. We impatiently anticipate solutions to our problems: more money, a new job, a safe home, protection for our loved ones. If you have life-challenging problems, you need solutions today. If you are in a burning building, you need the firefighters to break through walls, shatter windows, and knock down doors. There are times when we simply need God to move—now.

I feel the prophet's urgency for our world today. Do what you have to do, Lord—tear open the heavens, break down the door—come down! Now! Let us embrace the urgency of this moment in our society, anticipating and expecting God to move as only God can. In this unprecedented time, we need something new that we have never had before, and Lord, we need you now!

Prayer: Tear open our hearts, set our souls afire, mold and make us to be the reflection of your love, working boldly to imagine and create a new world—now. Come through now, O God. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

What Will God Do through You?

Read Isaiah 64:1–9

*Yet, O Lord, you are our Father [Mother];
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8)*

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had a clear layout of God's plan for our lives? We are eager to take assessment tests to learn more about our personality, temperament, gifts, strengths, and weaknesses. It is usually not so much that we don't know ourselves, but rather that we want some kind of clear sign that who we understand ourselves to be is truly who we are. More importantly, we want to know if who we are is what God has planned.

Having called out to God to act, the prophet acknowledges that we must yet be yielded to God's creative power. Yes, yielded, being ready to be used in the kin(g)dom of God in ways that weren't a part of our own plans. God can use every experience we've had along the way to bring us into a way of being and serving. God can show us how every step, every stumble, every turn in the road along the way can be used to equip for this moment. In this season when we welcome the new light, may you see how God has led, and remember that God will keep.

Prayer: Mold us, make us, O God, so that we may have courage to step forth into new ways of being your people. Give us the courage to yield ourselves to new shapes and patterns that can be reflections of your love in the world. Amen.

Thanking God for You

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thessalonians 3:9–13)

As I am completing the writing of this devotional, the entire world is in quarantine because of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. We find that we have no choice but to adapt to using technology to stay connected. We are gathering on FaceTime and Zoom, struggling to create meaning in these digital spaces. We have now celebrated a Palm Sunday and Easter in these isolated rhythms, boldly declaring “Hosanna” and “He is Risen!” as we responded in online worship services. We miss each other.

Paul’s longing for the Thessalonians is palpable, but he is not just missing their physical fellowship. Out of his love, he is praying for them. He wants them to grow, to love each other lavishly, fully. As we live into being church in this new world, now forever changed by COVID-19, I hope you are praying for us all to love more like Jesus. The selfishness that too often invades communal life, even in church, must give way to an abundance of love and grace. May our living into a new love and gratitude for one another light our pathway to the kingdom of God.

Prayer: Lord, may our love for one another strengthen us as we build your beloved community. Now more than ever, fill our hearts with thanksgiving for each one you have created and called your own. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

God Is Faithful

Read 1 Corinthians 1:3–9

God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:9)

What do you mean when you say, “God is faithful”? For some, it is just a polite way to respond to a compliment, or a way of acknowledging God’s goodness when we have received material blessings. It is often our response once we have been through a tough time. But what does it mean to say, “God is faithful” when we are in the midst of difficult circumstances? What grounds our ability to declare God’s faithfulness in hard times?

Paul speaks to the church in Corinth, encouraging them in the midst of persecution. Enduring hardship is not desirable nor should it be considered necessary as some sort of badge for righteous nobility. Suffering is, however, part of our human existence. Paul gives thanks that their testimony about Jesus has not been shaken by difficult situations. Our faith in God must begin with what we believe about God. If we believe that God’s love is limitless and all-encompassing, then any attempt to limit that love diminishes who God is. And if we believe that God is ever-present and that God’s essence is love, any theology that would separate God from God’s creation diminishes God. I cannot embrace a God whom humankind can limit or diminish. I believe that God is limitless, ever-loving, and all-encompassing. And because I believe that, I can firmly say, “God is faithful.”

Prayer: Thank you, God, for reminding me you are never limited by circumstance or human interpretation. You are faithful. Amen.

Walking in the Light of God

Read Isaiah 2:1–5

*He 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.
O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk in the light
of the LORD! (Isaiah 2:4–5)*

When humans are deprived of light, our sense of well-being is adversely affected. When communities face systemic injustice, their physical and mental security is traumatized and diminished. Without the light of hope, and the establishment of justice, such social violence can stunt our human capacity to thrive.

Isaiah paints a vivid picture of a place where God dwells, in the highest of mountains, lofty and spectacular. It is not just a beautiful place but sacred space, where justice reigns and where people will seek to be like God. Nations will no longer fight, and they will use the resources once used for war to build peace among all peoples. This vision is cast for a people who have known exile, oppression, and defeat. Isaiah knows that the vision of this powerful and just God is the only hope that can break through their darkness.

Only the light of a loving God can give us such a hopeful vision. Only when we seek to be like God, to love like Jesus, can we take the systems of this world, so long used to perpetuate injustice, and build a world where all can thrive, where all have enough.

Prayer: Lift our heads toward you, O God, that we may arise from the depths of injustice, ready to walk together in your light, building a world where all are loved, and where all have enough. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The House of the Lord

Read Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me,

“Let us go to the house of the LORD!” (Psalm 122:1)

Psalm 122:1 was one of the first Bible verses I learned as a child. Church folk were excited to be in the sanctuary to praise God, and this verse was used as the first line of many a testimony offered during the devotional period. In the African American community, “the house of the Lord” represented not only a place where one felt the presence of God but also a place where we were fully in charge, a building we owned and could use as we wished.

The Jewish people were bereft when the Temple was destroyed. They lived for generations without being able to worship there, at times not even being able to enter Jerusalem. The COVID-19 pandemic kept us from our traditional holy spaces. We have embraced the truth that wherever we encounter the Holy is sacred space. Any table around which all are welcome is the Lord’s Table. Any spot from which the gospel is preached is sacred. The house of the Lord can be constituted in cyberspace. Gratefully we enter the sacred spaces of our making, lifting voices and hearts to praise a God who cannot be contained.

Prayer: O Holy One, may we make space within and all around us for your presence among us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Time to Wake Up

Read Romans 13:11–14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. (Romans 13:11)

To be “woke” in our contemporary vernacular is to be aware of the injustices in our society and to be vigilant in fighting against them. To not be “woke” is to be oblivious to systems that create inequity, or to fail to resist them even if you are aware. To see injustice and not try to fight it is perhaps the height of selfishness that seeks only to preserve one’s own comfort and privilege. “Woke” people are impatient people who do not believe that justice can wait. They live into what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called “the fierce urgency of now.”

Paul called the church in Rome to “wake from sleep.” The kingdom was closer than it had ever been, he reminded them, so it was more important than ever that they be examples of the power of Jesus’ love. Followers of Christ cannot afford to be asleep on the watch for justice, for love compels us to live into Jesus’ message of peace and hope for all. The urgency of the new world proclaimed by Jesus compels us to wake up and get to work. Love demands our all as never before. It is past time to wake up.

Prayer: Lord, give us courage to wake up, stand up, and show up for the reign of God to which you have called us. May our living into your love bring your reign to us now. May it be so, Amen.