Reflection on Advent 1 Year A 2022

*It’s Always Darkest Just Before Dawn*
(Isaiah 2:1-4, Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44)

It was one of the strangest, and I have to say, consequential exchanges of my life.

My team leader in the organization I was working with, a woman of maturity at 27 years old (I was a mere 21 years old at the time), came up to me and said, “While I was praying I got the strong impression that you should get ready for marriage, you will meet your future wife within six month!”

It was like time stood still; I was aware that my impression of this woman’s intelligence and care was crashing into what seemed out of character, weird, off-putting and yet inside me was the visceral sense that something was coming alive that I had repressed in my missional fervor. For a moment I was in liminal space.

One of the most amazing things is that something that just took me about 30 seconds to explain because actually happens in our amazing human brains in probably no more than a second.

In that brief moment after what my leader said, my brain and heart connected, and I heard myself say, “wow!” Then my brain “executor” brought together the weirdness and hopefulness of this “prophetic word” and I decided to trust her.

She had been trustworthy in the past, why not now? So, I began to pray and put in some work on my character (something that never gets completed!).

“Get ready” she had said. Those two words are at the theological heart of our readings today and they are at the heart of the beginning of the Church Year, the season of Advent.

Those of us who have observed Advent in the past are probably familiar that it is a Latin word that means “the coming.” But because we live after the fact we know “what’s coming,” I mean “who’s coming.”

The existential alertness required of getting ready loses it’s punch; it’s hard to get ready for something that has already happened!

Each season of the church year points to a fundamental facet on the diamond that is Salvation; each facet reflects the light of that diamond slightly differently.

Advent is the first season, the beginning, maybe even before the beginning if you will. I mentioned in my midweek update that the Hebrew scriptures start not with Creation as such but in the “getting ready for Creation,” in the darkness and chaos just before Creation.

This “before time” is then ritualized in the weekly observance of Sabbath which begins after the sun goes down the day before, that is, in the dark. And then, for the Christian Tradition, Advent

To say the obvious, before any sort of coming, no one comes, before there is light, there is the dark.

But what the Judeo-Christian tradition says about this is so interesting; it’s not like there’s nothing happening: Before Creation, the Breath of God or, same word in Hebrew, the Spirit of God was brooding over the primal chaos, the deep.

Before the coming of the One, the prophets were announcing the coming; they were spelling out in metaphors God’s intentions, some of the most beautiful metaphors in literature are the ones Isaiah uses today: “swords into ploughshares,” “spears into pruning hooks.”

But here’s the thing, before Creation (if you happened to be a fly on the proverbial wall) you wouldn’t have known what would take place. If you were reading Isaiah’s poetry in 600 BC you wouldn’t have been able to tag those to historical events or how that would unfold.

What they would do, however, is call you to a way of being, to a stance of trust in God’s promise.

Called to a trust manifested as alertness, preparedness, anticipatory readiness, a good definition of faith. And these are all necessary for effective participation, for living alongside and with God.

For those of you who’ve played ball you know that your body is getting ready for the pitch before the ball is thrown. If it doesn’t you’re not able to hit the ball at all. There’s a spring-like readiness as your body coils in anticipation of the muscles releasing at the right time because you sense, you believe that the pitcher will throw the ball.

When we’re playing ball, we’re in the game, we can see the pitcher, feel the bat in our hand, we believe a pitch is adventus, coming.

But spiritual readiness is more fraught. It requires belief in what we do not yet see; and most of the time what we don’t yet see scares us, we default to dark visions.

But spiritual readiness involves moving from or at least holding at bay this defensiveness, this fight or flight mentality. We instinctively think that “to get ready” is to prepare for the bad, for the disaster, for that which cannot be trusted.

And it’s right to prepare for the coming Big One; for our governments to set aside money to mitigate disasters that will come.

For those of us who have experienced trauma, the fight or flight instinct is constantly lurking, we find it hard, without healing to imagine any other kind of readiness.

In an attempt to overcome the fact that we know “who’s coming” making the attempt to get ready a mute point, the great tradition did something very clever: Advent came to have a dual focus, on the one who had come *and* on the One who would come again at “the last judgement” at “the second coming/adventus!”

But that means that at first glance this beginning season of the Church year tends to reinforce our defensiveness. A surface read of the language of judgement has tended to focus people on the fear of being shown up as failures, as sinners and so the message ends up being the religious equivalent of *Santa Clause Is Coming to Town,* “he knows if you’ve been bad or good so be good for goodness sake.”

But the truth is just as Israel didn’t understand what it meant in reality that one was coming who would enact and make real the heart of God for universal peace, so Christians do not understand what we are to make of the biblical metaphors of a “second coming.”

What we do need to reckon with is that in comparison to what we’re presently experiencing, the dark, it will be like day in it’s brightness. The reality of our present life, however wonderful, is like sleep, says Paul, in comparison to the waking that is coming.

As psychology has come to learn, and I would add, a theology that reckons with a Loving God has come to learn, it is faith, hope and love that draws people towards the good not dark visions of judgement as God’s revenge.

It is the hopeful images in scriptures, like the ones here in Paul that help me take more seriously Paul’s admonitions about laying aside works of darkness and putting on the armour of light, putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.

37 years ago I had a fundamental choice: would I prepare myself for love, would I prepare my character to reciprocate love. If I had scoffed and said, “that’s bat-you-know-what crazy!” I wouldn’t have overcome my defensiveness; I would have sabotaged the process by not believing I was able or capable to be loved by someone as amazing as Denise Lynn Readel.

I was a person of great self-doubt; I didn’t believe I could be loved in the way my leader was suggesting I should get ready for.

Florence + the Machine’s lyrics speak what I felt; Regrets collect like old friends. Here to relive your darkest moments
I can see no way, I can see no way
And all of the ghouls come out to play

Without my leader Alison Clark’s words, I would have doubted myself and shut my heart off so I didn’t get “hurt.”

What she did for me that day was what this season of Advent and the scriptures associated with it are meant to do.

Help us prepare for a God who is coming to us in love. Trusting, that by getting ready for it, we will wake up from the dream of self-denial, self-loathing and self-doubt into the confident acceptance of our identity as beloved and as lovers.

Get ready for swords into ploughshares, really? Yes! It’s always darkest just before dawn.