

Poised

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This will be a Christmas like none other – and, (deep breath) Here we are at Advent.

Advent – the preamble, the place before the beginning (of the story, of the journey) the time you settle down, get ready, prepare.

Today we begin the Advent journey. Make no mistake, it is a journey but it is a journey of opposites. We're not going anywhere – we are staying awake and listening. Advent is often been celebrated as a process of building excitement and anticipation. Hope is the first Sunday. But that doesn't adequately represent the journey. If it were a physical journey – we'd set out with hope and enthusiasm, for sure. But with all journeys, the truth emerges in the experience: The flat tyre, the detours and the child who threw up.

The advent readings start in despair, they take us on a dark journey long before there is any star in the sky.

We spent much of the year celebrating the Spirit. We encouraged each other in our work towards the Kingdom. We gave thanks for God *with* and *in* us. We wallowed in Jesus' words and stories, his doings on earth...

but ultimately, we are faced with the reality that the world is still in a sorry state. A 2nd coming would be much appreciated ...now. Today. Hope.

Advent takes us back to the beginning.

The journey is an interior one. We need to return to the well, refresh, renew. And instead of setting out on a pilgrimage through the heat, we can use this time to clean house. We can use this time to lament, wail and listen to our hearts. To vent. To Hope.

Again, an opposite. The world tells us we should be racing around, shopping, cleaning and preparing for 100 guests but God calls us to a pilgrim's advent, to slow down; to ponder and to housekeep our souls.

The texts for today affirm the different, yet parallel purposes. The Old Testament yearns for a faithful people, the NT readings give thanks for a faithful people and anticipate the coming of Christ. All the readings during the week have been apocalyptic. I mean really, really dark. Take Thursday for

example, Luke's reading, (LK 21:20-28) said (and I paraphrase) when you are surrounded by enemies and must flee...there will be danger and horrible repercussions, especially for mothers and babies. There will be great distress, slavery, destruction and cataclysmic natural disasters and *then* Christ will come.

Holy cow! The readings are saying things have to be worse than they already are!

Matthew reading today gives us a glimmer of hope that after the stars fall from the sky, darkness descends and the heavens are shaken, we will see the 'Son of Man' descend in great glory. Note that the scripture gives Jesus *to* us – the Son of Man. Matthew doesn't leave us with Luke's the scorched earth vision. Mathew says when things get better, maybe just a little bit, maybe a whole lot better, then just like spring, there will be signs He is coming. We just don't know when...no one knows. So once again, the message is be ready, prepare, stay awake. Watch! Hope.

None of us knows *how* to prepare – especially for this Christmas. Yes, the borders are opening but too late for cheap flights. Yes, we can have more people at our house but too late to organise big gatherings like carols in the park. We still don't know when we can sing and the rules will change day by day so we can't plan anything. So we invent new traditions, zoom dinners, eating out if you're an 'in' person or 'in' if you traditionally eat out. We're buying our gifts on line or in many cases, skipping presents altogether. The world is in such a bad place, it seems a little distasteful to enter into the lavish celebrations of yester years. Perhaps the greatest gift we can give - is Hope.

There may even be a wee voice in your head that says last year it was fires, this year COVID nearly killed Christmas – what could possibly happen next year? Let's put that aside and treat this Advent like a prayer walk. Let's treasure every step, listen deeply, let the tension flow out of our shoulders and focus on our footsteps before the Day.

The only thing that is certain is Christmas is coming.

Christmas is a time of leaving the year behind and of celebrating the NOW of Christmas day. We are trying to let go and hold on at the same time. No wonder there are such mixed feelings at this time of year.

Before you start a journey, you prepare. So let us prepare.

Mary Oliver said prayers don't need to be beautiful or perfect 'like an Iris'. They just need to be honest.

Anne Lamott says you really only need 3 prayers in life. It's that simple. She says:

Wow! For the things that have bowled you over. An example for me would be in meeting that remarkable woman I talked about last week, Just watching her mission on earth inspired me. I'm going to give you a moment to think of that WOW moment. The new baby in Corinne's family.

Thanks! Remembering to give thanks and be grateful for the important things in life. Someone's recovery; a new grandchild, another year of healthiness. I will give you a moment to think of your biggest thanks so far this year.

And finally **HELP**. We can't do it alone and there are times when we just need to be humble enough to ask God. It may be as simple as asking for grace to deal with your sister in law or as deep as a call to faith or a prayer of sanctuary or health. It is personal. What do YOU need divine HELP to get you through this time.

Hand out new pens/paper with gloves + instructions. Silence to write. Music? The prayers are placed in the boxes under the tree marked H, T & W.

I am not going to read these. I will leave the boxes under the tree until this advent season is over. You can fill them as often as you wish. When the journey is over, the physical evidence will be destroyed. The prayers will live on.

If you want, take some paper home with you to write and drop more in the boxes next week.

Advent – the root word for adventure. A time to prepare and stay alert, the Lord is coming. Let's prepare our hearts, in fact, let's open our hearts to make room at the inn. Hope might sneak through the crack.

The next 3 weeks – we will be poised, ready to spring into action but holding still. Like a cat, we will watch, see, smell, hear, feel *everything* but hold steady, ready to launch. Hope lurks in the grass.

My prayer for this year

Lord, you make everything new again. The gift this year is a Christmas like no other. I am using this chance to do less, spend less and give more to those in

need because Lord, you have sent this Christmas to wake me up. This is a Christmas asking 'what is important?!' Thank you.