

## Are We Ready?

I love labyrinths and spirals—cyclical symbols of transformative evolution, guiding us back with beginner’s mind to the same place, for the first time. Advent starts the new year, always again, and always for the first time—because we have never stepped into this river, or this year, twice. The Christian year closes with the promise of Christ’s majesty, Christ’s kin-dom, Christ’s reign, and then we begin the year again in wonder, awe, waiting, and preparation for a new birth of who knows what and who knows who and who knows when? We are actually meant to enter that liminal space, like feeling the squishy gel and discomfort of an ultrasound. There is something growing inside of us, inside of the world, inside of our longing, our hurting, our joy and our wanting. But we don’t know what it is.

I’m remembering an Advent sermon given last year at the First Congregational Church of Ashfield by Nancy Sykes, who helped the church out during our interim time and has become a blessed member of our community. Nancy told of a grandchild’s question to her about the meaning of Christmas—knowing that it centered Santa Claus and Jesus, but not sure about how. After Nancy shared, in age-appropriate terms, the meaning of Advent, a package showed up at the house she shares with her partner, Rev. Ann Hallstein: an Advent calendar with real, plush toy animals. Well, Nancy’s glee and anticipation over the plush toy animals was palpable. She and Ann could hardly wait to open the numbered boxes each day of Advent to see who was inside. And in the telling of this story, she acknowledged the fun and excitement in their conflicted participation in a commercialized ritual that still retained Advent’s qualities of wonder and waiting.

Advent calendars filled with candy and toys can be understood as a contemporary refusal to deal with the anxiety of waiting and wondering. To the followers of the Jesus movement in the decades after Jesus’s crucifixion, today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew had a historical context drawn more from a dream destroyed than a dream awaited. As the decades went by after Jesus’s death, the communities of his followers grew weary and uncertain, as they waited for the Messiah’s return. And the theologies of early Christianity shifted from the expectation of his imminent return to a more nuanced waiting and wondering about the spiritual, rather than the literal, meaning of his teachings and parables.

All this transpired during an intensified Roman occupation, and then the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. This was the historical backdrop to Matthew’s gospel. So his

comparisons to Noah's plight make sense—Jerusalem's destruction was the sinking of the Jewish world, the fire next time.

Jerusalem's devastation made an example out of Jewish people. It reminded the rest of the empire that Roman power was not to be challenged. It also raised significant theological issues and questions about the identity, way of life, and future of Jewish communities in the empire. What was God doing? Had God withdrawn God's presence and blessing? How should they live so as to prevent such a terrible thing happening again?

Matthew's telling is a sacred history in which God intervenes. But it is neither a history of Israel, nor a history that ends with Jesus. It is a history in which the Hebrew Bible is neither forgotten nor abandoned, but fulfills the great promise of God. And what Matthew offers us in today's Gospel is a re-set, a do-over, a renewal and a restoration of God's creation. Unlike the days of Noah, in the days to come, we have agency, power, and open invitation to participate in crafting the end of our own story. What if we lived our lives holding the remembrance of things past alongside a future vision, as we choose our present actions? What if we choose the possible as probable and follow the way of the kingdom on earth as in heaven? What if we choose the possible—like ending gun violence, transforming the fear of others that keeps showing up as racism, sexism, and all the others—what if we choose the possible and stay alert and make ready for the birth of a new earth?

I will close with a prayer parody written by Mark Twain about a hundred years ago, because it reflects on today's Advent theme of peace by throwing light on the many ways that self-affirming Christians have disavowed Jesus's teachings over millenia, using his name to do so.

*Mark Twain, "The War Prayer" (ca 1904-1905)*

“O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle — be Thou near them! With them — in spirit — we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of

summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it — for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen."

<https://www.americanyawp.com/.../mark-twain-the-war.../>

May this season of getting ready to be Christ's newborn love fill us with the will to live our possibilities for peace on earth, now and evermore.