

Advent 1 November 29, 2020

This morning we begin our new church year together on this first Sunday of Advent, and in a few minutes, we will join together in a service of Holy Communion for the first time in many months during this pandemic. I have to say that both of these are something I have looked forward to for some time now. I have found myself in this topsy turvy pandemic year looking forward to see things I expect to bring at least a passing sense of normalcy to our lives. But then again, this is 2020, after all and still the most unexpected can happen! I found myself utterly stunned and delighted by the discovery of a mysterious, strange monolithic sculpture in the desert in Utah this week. If you didn't hear the story, let me quickly summarize it: a team from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources was flying low in a helicopter over the desolate canyons to survey the population of bighorn sheep when suddenly they saw a strange object at the bottom of a

canyon. They landed and found a 10 foot tall, shiny metal object, and as one of the team said, this was, "literally the middle of nowhere!" Because it bears an uncanny resemblance to the monolith in the movie, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, there has been all sorts of speculation if it is a tribute to the movie, placed there by a local Utah sculptor, or even placed there by aliens. Who knows? I just have to say I'm absolutely intrigued by what I hope is the last, unexpected surprise of 2020, and that next year there will be many fewer surprises in store for us!



Wildlife officials discovered a monolith embedded in the rock in southeastern Utah. The authorities say they do not know how deep it goes, or how long it has been there. Utah Department of Public Safety

Prayer: Most merciful God, we come together today both to hear your Word for our lives and to be nourished by your body and blood. Grant that in the days to come, we may deepen our faith and follow ever more closely where you lead us in love. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Advent is a time for us, for you and me, my sisters and brothers, to live in full hopeful expectation of the coming of Christ into our lives, bring to you and me the fulness of God's love. Often in the church we speak of our hope: our hope in God's promise and our hope in eternal life through Jesus. But our Advent faith is deeper than

this Our Advent faith is stronger than this. During this time, a season that to all appearances is bleaker than most, as the days dim and fade, as the darkness grows stronger in the shorter days, this is a time when hopes seem quite fragile. Our great American poet, Emily Dickinson says that, "Hope is a thing with feathers," and as beautiful as that image is, there is a fleeting, fragile aspect there. But our Advent faith is not a faith merely of hope; no, no Advent faith is a faith of hopeful expectation. This is a season of hopeful expectation, but to be precise, that is a phrase that needs to be broken down. Advent is both a season of hope and expectation. One of my theology professors at Union Seminary taught that there is a clear distinction between between hope and expectation. As Prof. Driver put it, "If I invite you over to dinner at my home on a Tuesday evening, at six o'clock, I don't hope for the doorbell to ring, I expect it to ring!" I think that this is a helpful way for us to enter into Advent faithfully this year: our hope has to do with the world as we want it to be, but our expectations are based on the world as we know it to be and on our experiences as well. That's why showing up for a dinner invitation is a much more than a hope, simply wanting the guest to come for dinner, but an expectation, because a plan was made, times, schedules and calendars were checked and coordinated, food was prepared, all based on a mutual acknowledgement and a mutual understanding.

I think the season of Advent enters our lives in both these senses, with hope and expectation. The expectation comes to us through our Scriptural witness, through the promise of God for our salvation and for freedom and peace for the world. This is a word given to our ancestors, but it remains part of our story as well...our faith is in a God who is with the world from the beginning...creating and bringing life and possibility into the world, in the midst of chaos and darkness, bringing order and purpose and bringing forth new and creative possibilities into existence. But most creatively, most profoundly, God brings love into all God creates. That love, of course, is who God is, God is love as John's First letter says, a love that exists at the very core of the cosmos, a love that infuses all this ever has been, all that is and all that ever will be. This is why our Advent faith is so counter cultural and against the grain, especially this year. The coming of God's love is not simply our hope, but now in Advent the promise of God's love is our expectation. As we gather now in prayer, we gather as those who hear God's word that is creating and bringing God's love anew into each of our lives, bringing god's love anew into our world so desperately in need of the fulness of God's love now.

On this First Sunday of Advent, this time in our life together as the church where we look to this time of new beginnings, a time to look forward in helpful expectation for God to begin the process of restoring God's intentions in creation, to bring us into that place in our lives together that we can accept that God will make a new beginning for us. The Prophet Isaiah uses that wonderful image this morning of God as the potter and we are the clay. I don't know if you have ever worked a potter's wheel or seen a master potter throw a pot. The potter starts with a lump of clay, unformed, but on

the wheel and under the guidance of the potter's skilled hands, the vessel takes shape. One of the marvelous things is that nothing is lost in the process; the potter uses just as much clay as needed and slowly scrapes away any excess, but it will be used to make another object. And if the work of the potter's hand doesn't quite come out right at first, the potter simply uses the clay over to make a suitable pot. It really is an amazing process, and I think that Isaiah's use of it to describe how God acts in our lives and in the world is quite good.

To make a right start of this new beginning, to deepen our faith of hopeful expectation in Advent, today we will once again offer up our thanks to God almighty, to offer our lives, and in making this thanksgiving, we are fed and nourished by God. This morning, for this First Sunday of the New Year, we have blessed bread and wine, to bring us into God's presence, the promise of Christ's presence with us. As we say in the teaching of the Episcopal Church, this blessed bread and wine is for us, "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." For you and me, the blessed bread and wine we share today is to once again find in our lives the promise of God's love given to us once more, once more in something as ordinary and commonplace as the meal we share together is the very depth and power and fullness of God's love. This is part of our hopeful expectation as we commence this season of Advent; the hopeful expectation that God's grace will be present for us in that inward and spiritual way.

There is a larger fashion, however, in which breaking of the bread and sharing this blessed bread and wine together is also our hopeful expectation of the coming of Christ into the world and the changes which it will bring. Just as God has brought about new and loving possibilities for us in the creation of the world, in Advent we look forward in this hopeful expectation that God's love coming to our world in Christ Jesus will bring God's justice and peace, God's never failing love and mercy to us in a new manner. Our communion is a foretaste of this heavenly banquet, a pledge of our redemption and the redemption of the world by Christ Jesus. Mark's Gospel this morning anticipates these great changes in starkly apocalyptic terms, and that very dramatic rendering catches the urgency and the deeply longed for need for Jesus's Good News, good news that the injustices and the cruelties of this world, that the petty lies and self-aggrandizement of corrupt leaders and all not stand, but the care for the least of these, a world where want is overcome and all live with the fulness of their needs met, this is the world yearned for in Jesus's day and which we still live in that yearning. This Holy Communion we take today anticipates this new world, that Christ will, "strengthen you to the end," as Paul tells the Corinthians, and bring God's loving kindness to all. And in this strong yearning, in this anticipation is an urgency, the fierce urgency of now as Dr. Martin Luther King put it, a fierce urgency to make the work aright, no longer distorted and corrupt by our turning from God, but instead a world aligned in God's loving purpose to bring peace into fulness. Thus the urgency in Mark's gospel, to keep watch, keep awake, be ready to open your hearts and spirits to God's gift of love for you and for me, be ready

to find the depth of that one in your life and always be ready to share the depth of this love with our neighbors, to share this love in the world which needs it so much. And so we gather this morning, not around our Altar at Good Shepherd, but we gather at a virtual Altar, online, yet present to each other and to Jesus, to share this holy meal and to be strengthened in our faith, a faith hopefully expecting God's love to come among us and to strengthen us in seeking God's justice and peace and sharing this love supreme with all in our world. Thanks be to God for this great grace and thanks be to Christ for bringing us the fulness of God's love. Amen.