

Do Not Fear: The Beginning Is Near **Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen** **NPMC – Dec. 6, 2020, Second Advent**

Scripture: Isaiah 9: 2-6; Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)

Hymns: As the Pauper Waits for Plenty (StS 9), No Wind at the Window (StS 11)

Isaiah 9:2-6

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

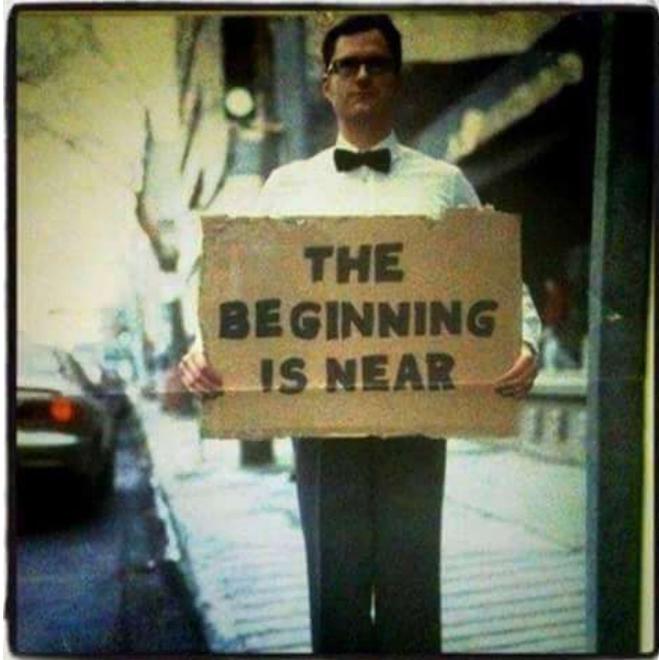
⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Luke 1:26-38:

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born ^[d] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am

I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.



A friend on social media recently shared a photo that made me stop short and smile. You know those zealous street-preachers who hold up signs, usually saying something like, “Repent! The end is near!” Well, this photo flipped that message on its head. In it, a man stood on the sidewalk and held a sign saying, “The beginning is

near.” I stopped and thought to myself: what a perfect Advent message.

Advent, as you might remember, means “coming” or “arrival,” and marks the beginning of the liturgical or church year. It’s a time of patient waiting, a parallel to the waiting of the pregnant Mary of Nazareth for her child to be born. The hymn, “As the Pauper Waits for Plenty” (Sing the Story #9, verse 1) puts it beautifully:

As the pauper waits for plenty, as the weeping wait for mirth,
As a farmer waits for harvest and a woman waits for birth,
So do I wait for you.

In other verses of the song, the word “wait” shifts to longing: “So do I long for you.”

Perhaps this Advent more than ever, our waiting has turned to longing, has intensified into an impatient, even desperate waiting for God’s impending salvation, for God to be born among us as Emmanuel, God-with-Us. It may not feel like a great place to be. We

may feel that the joy of Christmas is tarnished for us this year by all of the restrictions and distancing from loved ones. But despite these mixed feelings, this Advent longing actually connects us more closely to our biblical passages for this Second Advent Sunday.

Our well-known passage from Isaiah 9 speak words of hope and joy precisely to a people who are experiencing its opposite: suffering military invasion and occupation by the Assyrians, which Isaiah describes as walking and living in a land of “deep darkness” (v. 2). They are, in fact, living under the heaviness of occupation, oppression, and war – injustice, violence, death, and despair are their present experience. Isaiah speaks of “the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor,” “the boots of the tramping warriors, and all the garments rolled in blood” (v. 4-5). All of these harsh realities, Isaiah declares, are coming to an end – the rod breaking, the warrior’s bloodied boots and clothes burned, the light dispelling the shadows of death. In other words, the beginning is near.

But what’s interesting is the means by which Isaiah declares these terrible things defeated. He does not say, take heart, there is a mighty army coming to launch a counter-attack! No, instead he says, “For a child has been born for us, a son is given to us” (v. 6). Our hopes rest not on military might or dominating power, but on the tiny shoulders of a baby who has been born for us. This is God’s answer to violence and oppression and fear: the ordinary miracle and vulnerable power of new life. As Taiwanese theologian C.S. Song points out: “In that critical time of the nation, Isaiah did not point to the fortification, to the armaments, to the troops, but to a pregnant woman

(or pregnant women) as the sign of God’s deliverance.” The beginning is near: it will come in a tiny baby who will bear important titles like “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (v. 6). By this child we will, in the words of Song, “believe in the victory of love over hate, life over death.”¹ In this child’s birth, we will experience the brightness of hope, the “increase” in joy and rejoicing, as “at the harvest” that Isaiah speaks about in verse 3.

Despite the fog of Covid-fatigue that hangs over us these days, our congregation has also experienced the power and joy of new life this year. In welcoming six new babies into our wider church family, we have rejoiced with families at these new beginnings. In celebrating child dedication in physically-distanced, pandemic-adapted ways with two families this fall, we have shared in their joy at these new little people in our faith community. Even across the distance, through videos and painting stars for our banner, etc., we have been blessed by the presence of these and other children of our church community, especially in these difficult times. Upon all these little shoulders rests our hope. The beginning is near.

But Isaiah’s words are, in some ways, just poetry. Sure, it’s prophetic poetry, but it’s still just words. It’s somewhat abstract and symbolic. In our second Scripture for today we have the words becoming flesh, which is a lot more complicated, and – for Mary at least – downright uncomfortable! And her reaction to the angel Gabriel’s news shows us the complexity of this situation. Mary’s first reaction on hearing the angel’s greeting is not rejoicing or even joy – it’s confusion: “But she was much perplexed by his

¹ C.S. Song, “Oh, Jesus, Here with Us,” in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 134-135.

words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be” (Luke 1:29). And then the angel says to her: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God” (v. 30). Do not be afraid. The angel Gabriel says this, and the angels will say it again to the shepherds when they meet them in the field with “good news of great joy” on the night of Jesus’ birth. It’s an interesting way of greeting people: do not be afraid. It suggests that they were afraid, and needed these words of reassurance and comfort: do not be afraid. Just as Isaiah’s famous words, “Comfort, comfort, O my people” from our hymn today (Isaiah 40) were not spoken to those who were already comfortable, but rather those in exile, these words of joy were not spoken to people who were already rejoicing, but to those struggling in fear, to those longing for God to bring new life.

Writer Sarah Bessey talks of this as the “tension” of Advent. She writes that Advent “is the time when we prepare to celebrate [Jesus’] birth and we also acknowledge that we are waiting here still for every tear to be wiped away. I think of waiting for the Christ-child, yes, and I think of the still-waiting for all things to be made right, for our longing for Shalom.” She goes on to share about the profound sorrow and suffering she experienced in having several miscarriages of longed-for babies, and how she has found space for that grief in the longing, in the not-yet of Advent. She concludes, “If Christmas is for the joy, then Advent is for the longing.”²

Bessey’s experience speaks to the vulnerability of bringing new life into the world, the tension between the joy and the risk of the experience, the mixed feelings that babies inevitably bring. Our culture tends to sentimentalize pregnancy, birth, and parenting, to gloss over the challenging and messy and downright scary parts of it. I

² See Sarah Bessey, “Advent is for the Ones Who Know Longing,” <https://www.sarahbessey.com/essays/advent-longing?rq=advent>

remember when I had my first doctor's appointment when I was pregnant with our daughter, my doctor wondered aloud to me why I wasn't showing more joy at the official confirmation of my pregnancy. "Aren't you excited?" she asked me. Well, of course I was happy at the news, but I was also nauseous twenty-four hours a day and, having had a difficult birth with our first child, wasn't relishing the thought of going through that again. Excuse me if I didn't jump for joy! The emotions were mixed, and there was some fear there, as there was for Mary, on hearing the message from the angel that she had



been chosen to have a child. Do not be afraid, the angel said to her, seeing fear written on her face. And Mary seems to have taken this to heart, because she says "yes" to having this baby; she has the courage to take the risk of bearing and raising this child of hope who will bring new life to so many. And she does this despite the precarious nature of her

circumstances as an unmarried young pregnant peasant woman in an occupied land. We who know the story know what sorrows lie in her future – this is not an easy road that Mary will travel. The First Nations Version of the Bible reflects this in calling Mary, "Bitter Tears," which is the meaning of her name. And just in the next chapter of Luke, we will see Mary experience displacement from her home, and Simeon foretell that her

own soul will be pierced, too. The Gospel of Matthew adds to this the danger of King Herod trying to do away with the baby boys of the Hebrews, and a time as refugees in Egypt. But despite all of this, Mary chooses courage and hope, chooses to keep faith in the knowledge that God is making all things new: the beginning is near.

So this Advent, I invite us to wait like Mary: to wait with a longing that holds grief and joy in tension, and in the midst of that tension, to have the courage to say “yes” to God’s way of peace and new life, even if it doesn’t look the way we expected it to. May we who long to embrace loved ones as a pregnant mother longs to cradle her child take heart in this time of waiting and longing, knowing that it will not last forever. May we, like Mary, heed the angel’s words: “do not be afraid,” knowing that the beginning is near.

AMEN