

Vigilant Hope
(Advent 1 & 2)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that God may teach us God's ways and that we may walk in God's paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. God shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Mark 13:24-37

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Vigilant Hope

However you begin Advent, right on time or a week behind, Advent always begins in the dark. The world around us ushers us toward Christmas with decorations that go up before the Halloween candy has disappeared, holiday playlists that begin before the leaves have stopped falling, and social media feeds overflowing with curated moments that glow warm and bright—all of it an invitation to skip straight to joy.

But scripture ushers us in another way. Not with sparkle and sentiment, but with apocalyptic texts and the unvarnished truth that the world is not as it should be. Advent names that tension that so many of us carry—the gap between prescribed cheer and lived experience. It acknowledges that grief doesn't disappear just because the calendar flips to December, that life can stretch us thin, that many of us live with constant, low-grade anxiety in a world that feels increasingly unstable. Advent makes room for those moments when we look at the world and wonder where God is.

Advent begins in darkness because hope cannot grow in denial. Hope grows in the dark. It grows when we tell the truth and still dare to watch for light. So Advent starts here: not with comfort, but with clarity; not with distraction, but with honesty; not with nostalgia, but with vigilant hope—the kind that keeps its eyes open and its heart awake.

Admittedly, the passage we read from Isaiah this morning, that beautiful vision of nations streaming to God's mountain and swords being beaten into plowshares, may not sound like darkness, but that's because we've taken it out of its context. Directly before and after this hopeful image of a peaceful future, Isaiah describes the far darker reality of life as it actually was: hollow worship, corrupt leaders, violence filling the land.

It's not surprising that our culture skips right to twinkling lights and joy, joy, joy. Even for those of us steeped in church culture, it is tempting to skip the truth-telling part. It would be easier to brush past the cracks in our own lives—to tell ourselves we're fine, to push down our exhaustion and ignore the places where we feel stuck. But prophets like Isaiah remind us that we can't fix what we won't look at. Prophets like Isaiah preach a hope that is defiant because it refuses deception. Isaiah's vision of swords becoming plowshares isn't rooted in any evidence that the world is headed in that direction, it's rooted in God's dream for the world.

Our passage from Mark, offers a similar defiant clarity. What Jesus describes is upheaval: the sun darkened, the heavens shaken, nations in distress. In biblical terms, it is an apocalyptic text, but despite how it sounds, apocalyptic texts in the bible weren't meant to be divine fear-mongering. They were meant to be texts that reveal, texts that strip away illusions. Texts that name the fragility of the world we've built, the instability of the powers we trust, the ache beneath our hurry and distraction. And then, having named the reality of a world in which everything is shaking, Jesus' command is to, "Stay awake."

In other words: Don't fall asleep to the world's pain. Don't pretend that darkness isn't real.

Advent begins in the dark because we cannot practice hope if we're busy pretending we don't need it. We cannot watch for God's future if we refuse to name the present. Hope grows in the places we name—not the places we hide.

But telling the truth, while necessary, isn't enough to sustain hope. Because hope isn't something that simply arrives like a package on our doorstep. Hope isn't a feeling, something we either have or we don't have, hope is a way of life. It's a posture, a discipline, a set of rhythms that train us to stay awake to God's presence and look for God's future.

Jesus' command isn't, "Feel hopeful," it's "Stay awake." It's practice attentiveness. Pay attention to the fig tree. Watch the tender branches. Notice the small signs that indicate summer is near. The world around you may be shaking, but look closely—God is still at work.

Isaiah is even more specific, "Beat your swords into plowshares;" "Stop training for war;" "Walk in the light of the Lord." Take what destroys and reshape it into something that nurtures. Take the habits that harm and transform them into habits that heal. These are daily acts. Embodied choices.

Hope isn't a mood, it's a formation, a way of looking at the world, which means it requires practice. And our scripture passages for this morning suggest two.

The first is cultivating attention—watching for signs, noticing God's presence even when it's subtle. It means refusing the temptations of numbness and distraction. It means learning to see God's activity in our day-to-day lives: in conversations, acts of kindness, moments of unexpected compassion. Sometimes it's as simple as noticing the person in front of us: the neighbor who lingers just a little too long in the cold because they need someone to talk to; the friend who remembers a detail we mentioned weeks ago; the child who tells the truth with a candor that disarms us. Sometimes it's an intentional shift in our daily rhythm—a new gratitude practice, a breath of silence at the end of the day, a willingness to look up from our devices and really see one another. The world trains us toward distraction. Jesus calls us to attention.

Because hope grows when we learn to see, and it fades when we stop paying attention. It's no accident that Jesus so often says, "Let those with eyes to see, see." Hope begins noticing the holy hidden in the ordinary. It begins when we practice paying attention.

The second practice is that of transformation. In Isaiah, we see this transformation in his vision of swords and weapons being turned into plowshares and pruning hooks: instruments of harm transformed into tools that can cultivate life. It is an act of transformation that continues even today. Here in Racine, you can see it happen at Park High School where every year a class takes bullet casings and transforms them into jewelry that can be sold to support agencies like Mothers Against Gun Violence.

But transformation can also happen in our daily lives when we reshape the things that harm into things that heal. Resentment into reconciliation. Cynicism into curiosity. Despair into acts of mercy. This kind of transformation happens in hospital waiting rooms, at funeral luncheons, around kitchen tables—in moments when someone chooses kindness over retaliation, forgiveness over bitterness, generosity over fear. More often than not, transformation is slow, daily work. Work we must choose to do again and again. But it is work that cultivates hope because every time we take something that harms and reshape it into something that heals, we participate in God's dream for the world.

These two practices, attention and transformation, are the soil in which hope grows. But they aren't practices we can sustain in isolation.

Isaiah's vision of peace on the mountain is breathtaking not just because of what he imagines, but because of who he imagines. "All nations, Isaiah proclaims, shall stream to the mountain of the Lord." Not just the faithful few. Everyone. For Isaiah, hope is not a private endeavor. The beating of swords into plowshares is work done together, across differences, across divides.

And Mark's gospel reinforces this. Jesus' call to "stay awake" is addressed not to an individual disciple but to a group. Vigilance is shared work. Hope is something we carry for one another.

Because there will be seasons when our hope falters and someone else's hope will carry us. Just as there will be seasons when someone else cannot see the fig tree's budding, and our seeing becomes their encouragement. There's a scene in a novel I just finished where a young man in Ohio volunteers for a community night watch during World War II because he is ineligible for military service. And so, night after night, he walks in the dark, keeping an eye on the sky, staying awake so others can sleep. Hope doesn't erase the darkness. But it does create a circle of light—sometimes one as simple as taking turns keeping watch—so that the darkness doesn't overwhelm us.

It's one of the reasons why we worship, why we pray together, sing together, serve together, lament together, dream together. Because hope is a communal inheritance, passed from generation to generation, like a baton in a relay race. Isaiah did not see his vision fulfilled in his lifetime, but he carried the dream far enough to hand it to those who came after him. And we are called to do the same. Every act of mercy, every moment of courage, every quiet act of reconciliation, every time we refuse despair or confront injustice—we carry God's dream forward. We participate in God's future.

Hope is too heavy to carry alone. And God never asked us to.

Isaiah ends his vision with an invitation: "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord." And Jesus ends his teaching with a charge: "Keep awake." Together they form the heart of the beginning of Advent: tell the truth about the world, practice hope with intention, and carry hope together.

Advent always begins in the dark. But the dark is not the end of the story. The light is coming. God is near. Hope is stirring. And even now—in honest truth-telling, in steady practices, and in shared life—God is teaching us how to live toward the world that is on its way, that is already breaking through, if only we have eyes to see and the will to dream. Amen.