

**Sermon:
Hope**

Happy New Year!

As you know from our Advent candle lighting and the change in our vestments and linens to the color blue, we are beginning the church's New Year. Each year we enter this time anew, bringing this past year's experiences, history and wisdom into the seasonal darkness with us. Yes, this time is both Advent—a time of quiet waiting—and the darkest part of our year, too, with little sunlight and more darkness.

The Advent season's candles each represent different gifts that the Christ Child can bring on Christmas Day. Today, the first Sunday, we have lit the Hope Candle. Next week, the second candle invites us to welcome Peace; then comes the Joy Candle; and week four is the Candle of Love. Each one opens a door for us to focus on for a week while we consider what the Christ Child will bring us each: what do you need the most this year? With the insights from this past year, we can recognize which gift will help us continue expanding our love relationships with God and others. Which of these would help you the most as we begin the next year (Hope; Peace; Joy; Love)?

This week we focus on Hope. Hope is being able to see that there is light despite the darkness. Is the darkness you are living making it hard to recognize the love that is surrounding you? Or maybe it is making it hard for you to give love to

those who are around you? What are your deepest hopes today? Perhaps there are parts of your life you are hoping will change. We each have parts of our lives that we need God to restore, heal and make anew.

This is the week to think about how Hope can add to how we live in this world. Each year you and I arrive at this place of beginning, encountering our Advent candles and rituals of reflection in the darkness. These are rituals that invite us to wait, to wonder, to look for Christ, to recognize how we need God's love in our lives in a new way. We know that the Child will come, but right now Jesus is hidden—and will only be found by those who wonder and wait. Our work this week is to recognize where Hope fits in our lives and then remain watchful for how God's hand touches those needs.

Watchful. Awake. These are the words Jesus uses in today's Gospel when he was advising his Disciples how to be ready for Christ's return. In this reading, they are discussing the return of Jesus after his death—in so many ways, that is what we are able to celebrate each Christmas! And that is why this is our Gospel reading for this morning, too.

How will you stay awake and aware of the coming Christ this week and through this Advent season? I mean, besides the lists, that we will all be checking more the twice, and the cookies, and the gifts, and the social events, and so on. How can we be awake and aware—mindful and perceptive—to God's presence? This Gospel is reminding us that despite the business and the darkness of the season,

we can ready ourselves to see God's hand as it touches our lives or helps us face our fears with dreams and hopes.

Being prepared means being ready to experience and welcome God's touch. And it is amazing when it happens! We all know how it feels when we are really hurting. The biggest sorrows in our lives are the cracks in our in our hearts where God's light can get in to touch us. Training our spirits for God's arrival—whenever that will be—allows us to actually know the light when it shines in. Often this comes—at least for me—through people who I may not even know. Perhaps someone reaches out, shows up with assistance, or listens deeply. Sometimes we recognize our needs and actively hope for the help. Other times we don't even recognize what we need, yet...

That is what Advent is all about. Taking time in the darkness to know ourselves, discerning how our relationship with God can change with the birth of the Christ Child, as we build a new year.

And Jesus will come at our scheduled Christmas—but God will come to each of us at an unexpected hour. It might be in a special moment for you on Christmas Eve. Maybe in will happen when you are watching the candles at church, or as your child bursts through the door, happy to be home after a semester at college. We don't know when it will happen, but when we are ready, we will know God is touching us through what is ordinary and transforming it into something wonderful.

And so the circle of Advent season comes around again. But Advent is so much more than going through the motions of remembering a story whose ending we already know. Advent reminds us that Jesus came once and promised to come again. Advent is about the light shining in the darkness, where we are fed and quieted. With Hope, we find joy in today and confidence in tomorrow.

May it be so. AMEN