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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
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Advent 1

Despite the message we might hear in today's Gospel lesson from Mark, Jesus Christ is not waiting until the end of the world, or even until our death, in order to approach us. He is always appearing; he is the lord of a million disguises.

And despite the awful, truly awful, events that have occurred over the two millennia since his time on earth, there are signs -- truly marvelous signs -- that we are living in the kingdom.

On the one hand, I think of wars. Countless wars. Wars of aggression, wars of ethnic cleansing, wars simply driven by ego. I think of plagues. The Black Death. Bubonic plague. AIDS. I think of drought and devastating hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis. I think of injustice: of slavery, of cruel dictatorships, of the economic injustice of our present time.

And then on the other hand I think of the thousands of people who have touched lives with healing hands. I think of peace-makers. I think of those who have cried out with prophetic voices that human oppression is wrong. I think of scientists and doctors who have created medicines and procedures that have saved millions of lives.

And I think of good, simple acts of mercy and kindness and love that allow us, each in our own way, our own not insignificant way, to be the hands and heart of Christ in our broken world.

For all the evils that history has brought, it has also brought a magnificent array of witnesses, of worship, of wonders of God's mercy.

There is a wonderful Franciscan benediction I'd like to share with you.

May God bless us with DISCOMFORT ...

At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
So that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with ANGER ...

At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
So that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with TEARS ... To shed for those who suffer from pain,
rejection, starvation and war.

So that we may reach out our hands to comfort them
And to turn their pain into JOY.

And may God bless us with enough FOOLISHNESS...

To believe that we can make a difference in this world,
So that we can DO what others claim cannot be done. Amen

This is the end of times.

This is our Advent.

And yet Jesus and the prophets and our Patron St. John present us with a terrifying image of the last days. It's not about a tiny baby in a manger. No stable, no manger, no angels, no shepherds, no Magi. It is the end of the world as we know it: the stars go out, the sun no more lights the day nor the moon the night, the earth shakes and our Lord descends through the clouds. There will be wars in heavens and God will triumph. It will be a new heaven and a new earth in which the promise of creation is to be fulfilled.

And therein lies our hope. Hope for truth triumphant over fact, for justice and mercy over negligence, for joy over mere pleasure, for peace over war.

Our hope lies in the understanding that *Christ is alive* -- that while we celebrate the historic and historical events of Christmas and Easter, *Christ is alive* in our striving for justice, in our healing, in our visiting, in our feeding and caring for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, reaching out our hands simply because it is what is right. Simply because that's what Jesus told us to do. Simply because it expresses the love of God.

As the Franciscan benediction asks, may God bless us with discomfort. May we be truly discomfited when we witness politicians who are blasé over the thousands and thousands of people who have lost and *are losing* their jobs and their homes. May we be truly discomfited when the political arena is filled with self-interest. May we be truly discomfited when we hear someone say, "It's not my problem."

And then may we be angry enough to raise our voices - to protest, to argue, to pray, to sing, to weep in pain and to weep with joy when we discover the new heaven and the new earth in the soup kitchen, the homeless shelter, the hospital, or right next door.

It is too easy a job to preach about the end of times in a frightening and frightened way: Stay alert! Our Lord is coming to judge you! You will be rewarded at the eternal banquet or cast into the eternal fire!

Well, it might get your attention, but really... would it encourage you to be more compassionate? To feed a hungry person? To visit someone in jail? Or would it just scare the h*** out of you? Personally, I'd go for the latter.

No. We need to take the more challenging road. We need to be discomfited and angry and we need to weep the tears of God. And then we need to be foolish enough to really 1) care about what Jesus Christ told us to do and then 2) get out and do it. No matter how socially unacceptable it is, no matter how counter-cultural, no matter how weird, no matter how foolish it may seem.

Where have we been sleepy? How do we wake up? And then... how do we *stay* awake?

It's Advent. A time of readjustment, a time of renewal, a time of anticipation. We need space and time to breathe. To be quiet. To pray. Who is God calling me to be? What is God calling me to *do*?

Forget Black Friday. Stop making so many shopping lists. Write a letter to someone you haven't contacted in months. Don't worry that there is a dishwasher that needs to be emptied: sit down and make a gratitude list. Weave a prayer shawl. Write a poem. Visit your older

neighbor. Make cupcakes. Listen to Bach's B-minor Mass. Say a prayer. But *don't* give in to the commercial frenzy of the season.

We must remain alert. Alert to the fact that Christ is with us, that Christ loves us, that Christ travels with us and guides us and has enormous desires for us. We will only hear the quiet whisper of the Spirit if we allow ourselves silence.

Advent. Keep awake!

The kingdom is here. And the kingdom is now.

Make space for Jesus Christ.

Amen.