

## Advent I Year B 2023

We begin today a new church year, the season of Advent, the way we begin every new church year... The vestments have changed; the order of service is different; music now oddly in a minor key. Advent of course means coming. And we say it is the coming of the Christ child, what we have been saying over the last two thousand years... but what have we said? We begin the church year as our world sinks, quite literally, into darkness... We are approaching the winter solstice, the darkest time of the year for us who live in the northern hemisphere... leaves scuttle lifeless along lonely streets, dead memories, driven by the indifferent winds of a dying season.... There's grief at such a passing. It is a time when depression spikes according to studies; it is a time when hope seems more removed....the stories of darkness in the news seem more poignant....at home, in Mobile, Alabama, there is violence in our streets...Now systemic, now a pattern, embedded in the status quo; Racism, the original sin of our culture, has resurrected from the crypt of restless denial...violence and political unrest in the Middle East is now escalating again with global implications...Wars and rumors of wars... men of cowardice calling on the false God of violence for succor... food insecurity in this the wealthiest nation on earth is now as prevalent as it was during the Great Depression....

How can that be? Our democracy crumbles as we speak, with the specter of a contentious, if not terrifying, election cycle come round again. The voices of ignorance and fear and hatred are loud and astonishingly seductive... And by the way, arctic sea ice was at its all-time low this year; the climate continues to warm relative to human consumption, portending catastrophe....I could keep on ....Isaiah said it best...darkness covers the land; deep gloom enshrouds the people...He was referring to the deportation and captivity of Israel in Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E.....but Isaiah, improbably, in prophetic reverie, dares to offer hope that the Lord will rise up and that all people will stream to the saving light of God....and things are no different in Mark's day as he writes about the calamitous darkness descending upon the land, the ruthless destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the ensuing police state and continued Imperial brutality following the legacy of the tyrannical emperor Nero... and then, as ever... the sure and certain and audacious hope of God's saving power which will dispel such darkness in an improbable victory. The writer of Mark, ever the realist, implies that things will get worse before they get better. Where are the words of the prophet for us in days such as ours?

I had a parishioner once say to me: that we, the church, have been praying for over some two thousand years for things to get better, for things

to be set right; and yet things do not change. There is still injustice; there is still violence. If anything, things seem worse. Jesus came into the world once and for all, and the world is just the same. Ever the pragmatist, my friend asked “What good is the church?” What good is faith? Good questions, both. But perhaps the better question is, apropos of the Season of Advent: For what shall we hope, really? As the church, what is this coming that we expect; that we have expected for so long?

Just this past Thursday evening there was a gathering, a rally, held here at All Saints, in support of the Dallas family who lost their son, Jawan, to police violence here in Mobile. Many of you were in attendance. Bishop William Barber, head of the Poor people’s Campaign and civil rights activist was the keynote speaker. Despite this particular tragedy, the grief of it, the same tragedy that recurs week after week in our city among people who for four hundred years have experienced enslavement and discrimination and shame and violent abuse, only because of the color of their skin...despite that egregious and burdensome reality... the room was full, overflowing, with hope and expectation and joy for a new day. How can that be? It was altogether improbable, audacious, beyond reason. Again, the prophet’s words resound... The Lord will rise up among us and set things right, and people will stream to this light; a glorious coming; the Son of man

descending in the clouds; the binding up of the broken-hearted. You could feel the hope of generations in the moment, in this very room. It was all so gloriously improbable; so holy; so real.

And then the moment came for Christine Dallas to speak... the mother of Jawan Dallas. For months, week after week, she has showed up in respectful humility, bearing her grief, to petition the powers that be in our city to share information about her son's death. She was denied for over four months seeing the police body camera video footage of his arrest. She was not even allowed to see his body. She never spoke in anger. She spoke with respect, but was repeatedly denied the information that was rightfully hers as a mother. Where is the justice and compassion in that? The powers that be in the city turned a blind eye, but she persisted with courage and grace. And still she persists, as mothers do.

And Thursday evening, again, she spoke with humility and grace, and shall I say, with a divine authority. She told us that the Love of the community that has rallied around her has borne her up in this unthinkable crisis. She said that it was her hope that the injustice of her son's death would serve to prevent such an injustice from happening again to some other mother's son. She hoped that Jawan's needless death would effect change in the way the Mobile Police Department detains and arrests its citizens. She

has chosen to live into this tragedy as a means to a better city... a nonviolent and peaceful city. Brothers and sisters, that is faith... but more than faith... that is Love. It is only Love that can stand in the midst of the darkness come upon us, and offer hope. It is only Love that can transform the darkness of our world into meaning and purpose. It is only Love that can make light of the darkness. Her love, glowing, quite literally, gave light to the room.

We will hear read the Magnificat two Sundays from now. Mary, the mother of Jesus prophesying as to what the birth of Jesus means in the midst of a dark time. Christine Dallas spoke her Magnificat Thursday night in this place: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior; because God has looked upon the humiliation of his servant, and has called me blessed...How can that be? Her son was killed by the police, and yet here she was in the midst of a people, her people, thanking God for what God is doing in her life. That God has transformed an act of terror into the possibility of Love and redemption. Reason cannot explain that. Dogma can't contain it. Sisters and Brothers, what we expect to come and save the world from itself, is already among us, and her name is Love. We say that God is Love. Now I've seen it in the flesh.

In the midst of the darkness, good people, we have a duty to remind each other, and those we serve, that Love persists. That is our hope and our

expectation... that Love returns as Love always does... that the salvation of the world is the Love that is begotten of community. That is no false hope. We know the truth of it in our souls and our bodies. Love is the light of the world. Jesus was one among the many who, generation after generation, proclaimed the power of Love; its power to recreate community when community is broken by tragedy; its power to raise up the cast down and the broken hearted. Our hope is that love is forever at work in the world; and that there is nothing stronger, nothing more durable than Love. That is why we gather Sunday after Sunday as a community, because it is in community where Love makes its place. And we gather to remind ourselves, lest we forget, that Love is the ground of our faith; the ground of our very being.

The world will always be beset by the dark. Alas, that will never change. There is no utopian future around the corner. But there is Love and love comes again and again, and in Love's alchemy, meaning can be made of the dark, if only for a fleeting moment. Love's Advent is forever. That is our certain hope and sure expectation, in this the beginning of the church's new year. It is not some gargantuan leap of faith to make such a proclamation, because Love is our faith.... and I have to believe that Love in Love's time will change things for the better, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

I have always had a problem with idea that God lets things happen for a reason. I don't believe that. But I do believe that Love opens us up to infinite possibility, and meaning, and beauty, and that Love changes things in ways we cannot imagine. The admonition in Mark's Gospel is to keep awake. Keep awake, brothers and sisters to Love in our midst, the Love that binds us as community, the Love that only knows to hope. Love is an artifact from the future that tells us that in God's time all manner of thing will be well.... And change perhaps, and justice, and things set right. Love says all things are possible... I believe that. I believe Love is on the rise, even if it takes some 2000 years.