

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent I, November 28, 2010, dedicated to Alaina Margaret and Caroline Frances Thompson on their baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“Watch Out for Righteousness”

***Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44
(Part I of VI in the series
“All Earth is Hopeful”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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A flood, a kidnapper and a thief are sharp, intrusive and disturbing images that bring in this new year of Christian faith and introduce our Advent season.

Just when you thought it safe to bring friends to church and support our new “Season of Friends,” the Gospel of Matthew opens up a frontal assault of **warnings** – about **being unprepared** for Noah’s flood (the destructive flood of a lifetime), or **the being suddenly kidnapped** while working in field and mill, **or being robbed** while sleeping in your home by a break-in robber who takes all that you have!

Is it any wonder that people choose to stay away from church – moving to high ground, avoiding kidnap and protecting their homes with new Christmas gifts purchased

just two days ago, many in the pre-dawn hours of “Black Friday?!”

Our first Century ancestors of faith wanted to be sure their cozy Christian cousins 20 centuries on down the line didn’t miss the message of the coming of God!

The Lord will come suddenly!

Be prepared!

Watch out!

Be awake!

Wait for God!

Our early forbearers in faith wanted us to know what they already knew – Christianity is filled with “*the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*” of which Hamlet spoke in his famous soliloquy (William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1). And Advent is the season in which we are introduced most bluntly to these slings and arrows and their double-edged reality.

On the one side is the great, good news of the coming of God. On the other side is the cost of discipleship involved in welcoming and following Christ! We want good news with no cost. We want glory with no suffering. We want Christmas with no Advent. We want the baby with no pregnancy, labor or delivery. But it doesn’t work that way! The coming of God comes with a cost and in the full (and sometimes fearful) force of daily living.

The late, great German pastor, prophet, martyr and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer delivered these words in an Advent sermon on December 2, 1928, while preaching at 22 years old in his first parish in Barcelona, Spain. I share this long quote (from a much longer sermon) because of the brilliant understanding and insights the young Bonhoeffer brought (and still brings!) to faith and life in season of Advent.

Celebrating Advent means learning how to wait. Waiting is

an art which our impatient age has forgotten. The blessedness of waiting is lost on those who cannot wait and the fulfillment of promise is never theirs. They want quick answers to the deepest questions of life and miss the value of those times of anxious waiting, seeking with patient uncertainties until the answers come. They lose the moment when the answers are revealed in dazzling clarity.

Not all can wait – certainly not those who are satisfied, contented and feel that they live in the best of all possible worlds! Those who learn to wait are uneasy about their way of life, but yet have seen a vision of greatness in the world and in the future and are patiently expecting its fulfillment. The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who are looking forward to something greater to come.

He continued: When early Christianity spoke of the return of the Lord Jesus, they thought of a great day of judgment. Even though this thought may appear to us to be so unlike Christmas, it is original Christianity and to be taken extremely seriously. . . . Are we rightly prepared? Is our heart capable of becoming God's dwelling place? Thus Advent becomes a time of self-examination. 'Put the desires of your heart in order, O human beings!' (Valeintin Thilo), as the old song sings. It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly, whereas previous people trembled at the day of God, whereas the world fell into trembling when Jesus Christ walked over the earth.

We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's (peaceful) coming at Christmas, that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. . . . The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.

Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and death, and judges the evil in us and in the

world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love. (From A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, Harper, San Francisco, 1995, pp. 185-186)

We need to see that “God judging us” is a good thing. God judging us is God’s righteousness alive and at work in the world. It is God’s judgment that cleanses and sanctifies, bringing love, grace and justice. It is God’s righteousness. It is God’s goodness delivered as Incarnate Word.

“Righteousness” is one of the most important concepts in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Not to be confused with “self-righteousness,” which ends up elevating the narcissistic ones, “righteousness” appears more than 500 times in Hebrew scripture as *Tzedek* (justice and doing the right thing) and another 200 times in the Greek in Christian scriptures as *Dikaios* (justice, correctness, innocence). In Islam, the second Sera, 60th verse summarizes the way of righteousness for a faithful follower of the straight path: “Do no evil nor mischief on the (face of the) earth“(2:60).

As we enter Advent, we are called to watch out for “righteousness.” We are called to live into righteousness, too. In the words of the William Tyndale, an early Biblical translator, we are called to be “right wise,” or to be in the “right way.” We are called to prepare for the coming of God through “doing the right things” as people who are pleasing in the eyes of God.

If you are not sure what is “the right way” or how you do the right thing, I offer you the wisdom of another young baptizand whom I also prepared for the sacrament into which Alaina and Caroline entered into this morning. He was a 7-year-old.

I asked him what it meant to follow Jesus all the days of his life. He answered, “Don’t you know Rev. Tim? It means

doing the right thing every day,” which is, after all, the way of righteousness. Prophets come in all sizes and each generation!

We know when we are doing the right thing every day. As Washington Gladden said in his poem *Ultima Veritas*, “I know when right is right. I know when wrong is wrong.” Don’t we all? When something *is* right, it feels right. It looks right. It is fair and just. It brings harmony to those around us. It is honest. It is clear. It brings justice to the poor and the forsaken. It is the fruit of right living. It is right.

So my friends and all our friends of friends joining us for this “Season of Friends”: Be aware. Be awake. Watch. Wait. It may be frightening at first. But once you choose its path and step into it, living its way, it feels right.

Do the right thing. And as you do . . . **watch out for righteousness.** And be not afraid of the Lord of Life, who is coming again in righteousness. Amen.

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