

Happy New Year! No, no, don't worry, I haven't lost it. But given that last week I pointed out that it was the last day of the church year, today is the first day—well, the first Sunday, anyway. A new year, a new start. A new Advent season to wander our way through on our way to the manger.

This year we begin with what sounds like bad news.

If we remember from two weeks ago the passage was about the fall of the temple and the destruction and desolation that would come along with it. Wars and rumors of wars. Nation against nation, earthquake and famines. The rise of false prophets and the persecution of true believers. Because we didn't read the whole passage we didn't hear the part about the son of man coming on a cloud—but it was there.

Today is the completion of that passage, and what has happened is that someone has asked Jesus when all of these things will come to pass. Well, way back at the beginning someone asked that, and at this point Jesus finally gets to the answer, which is of course, "no one knows." No one, not even the angels or the son of man himself, no one knows but God when these things will happen.

Unfortunately much of this passage has been used to do just that, to try to predict when Christ will return, when the end of things will happen. Part of this, I believe, is a desire to convince others we have knowledge that they don't have; perhaps it's also a "carrot and stick" mentality: the signs are there! Repent before it's too late! And maybe it's pure superstition, our seeming need to know, to have signs to look for so that we feel in control of what sounds like a very out of control situation.

But for whatever reason, here we are hearing from Jesus about times to come. His return, or at least the return of the Messiah, the Christ. And since we aren't to know when this will happen, and knowing that it's imperative that we are ready when it does happen, Jesus has some good advice for his followers: keep awake so that we will be ready when the time comes.

It will be, Jesus says, as it was during the time of Noah. People will be going about with no thought that anything will change. Eating and drinking because the present is assured; marrying and giving in marriage because they expect a future generation to come just like all generations that have come before. They people will be going along living their lives and will be taken by surprise just as they were during the time of Noah. All will be affected by this event, men and women alike where they are with no warning. And so, says Jesus, we must keep awake, so that we will be ready when the Lord comes.

But keeping awake isn't as easy as it seems, though is it?

Keeping awake isn't easy because, life, right? Life intervenes. Life interrupts. We try to be aware of God working in our midst, preparing us and the world around us for the return of Christ, but distractions happen, tragedies happen, college football happens, and we forget. We forget to be vigilant, and really, it isn't possible to maintain constant vigilance. In fact, in psychology hypervigilance is often a sign of trauma or abuse. Or we just get worn down and hopeless from the weight of life. And it doesn't help to know that the coming of the Lord might bring us more trouble, more sorrow.

But then we see texts like the one from Isaiah. The passage from Isaiah was written after and about the return of the Israelites from exile to Babylon, and about the promise of God's coming kingdom: the Lord's house will be the place that all people go to, streams of people, looking for guidance from the Lord. The word of the Lord will be a changing word, a word that causes people to recognize the futility of constant war, the futility of the constant fight for survival in a world in which the powerful stack the deck against those with less power. Then the Lord will intercede in the broken systems of the world

and feeding the hungry will become more important than growing the military-industrial complex. The rich and powerful will join in relationship with the poor and meek and peacemakers. All inhabitants of the world will be filled with hope because in God's economy no one is left out, no one must compete for basic necessities, no one will suffer from illness and be ruined trying to pay for it. The world will be filled with hope, will be transformed by hope, will become hope personified. When the day of the Lord truly arrives.

Of course, we know from the gospel text that between now and then we have work to do. We do have to try to be vigilant, to look for God at work in the world and point out where we see God at work in the world. We have a role in transforming the world, as we are ourselves transformed by the hope we find in the promised coming of the son of humanity.

For hope is transformative. As Andy said to Red in *The Shawshank Redemption*, "Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies." Hope can carry us through the worst of times, as it carried Andy through his time in prison. Hope can stir us to do things we never thought we'd do, accomplish more than we ever thought possible.

You've heard me and Bill and Johanna talk about Transformation 2.0, perhaps more than you'd like to hear. We've done interviews and a neighborhood walk, and shared the results of the interviews with you all. (and if you didn't get a copy of the report and want one, let me or Bill know and we'll hook you up.) The interviews and the report were intentionally focused on positive aspects of the ministry instead of concentrating on where we fall short or what we're doing wrong (not that we are, but when people are anxious we tend to look at what's wrong instead of what's right.) But the questions were positive—"where do you see God working in the community" and "when did feel most alive and engaged in ministry at COF?" The report reflected the positivity of the responses to these questions; and this is important because moving forward requires energy and positivity (rather than anxiety and discouragement.) and I very much want us to move forward into a place of congregational health and hopefulness through the process of transformation.

Just look at where we've come since I came here. We have a homeschool group using our building, a group that is so excited to be here and have a space that they can feel at home in. When SPARK came to us the location they were meeting in required that they pack up all of their stuff at the end of each meeting time, so just having a stable space is life-giving to them.

We also are cooking and serving meals at Cornerstone, something else that is greatly appreciated by both the Cornerstone ministry and the folks who have little access to regular hot meals. The impact we're making there I think is quite significant and I am hopeful that we can continue it into the new year.

Of course, our established ministries continue and give us hope for the future. Over the years countless numbers of us have been changed by volunteering at CLASP and by the hope it has brought to the children and families of Ludlow. And Bill Lindsay is taking a new step into the community by becoming a mentor to a child at the Glen O. Swing elementary school down in the Peasleburg neighborhood of Covington.

And I guess my point is this: yes, the larger church is declining. Yes, we are smaller, and older than we were in the past. But I don't believe that we've lost hope in the goodness of God to lead us, to strengthen us in the work God has for us to do, to keep us hopeful even in the darkest of days. To paraphrase Philippians, *we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us*. For in Christ we have hope, and in this hope we are transformed into the hands, feet and heart of God in the world. Amen.