

Look! Snow upon Snow—God comes.
Rev. Ruth Martz

November 27, 2016
Isaiah 2: 2-5; Matthew 24: 36-44

Note: In Worship, we sang the first verse of “In the Bleak Mid-Winter,” before we lit the first candle of the Advent wreath.

*In the bleak mid-winter, frosty wind made moan.
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter, long ago.*

You might be surprised that we sang the first verse of “In the Bleak Mid-Winter” on this first Sunday of Advent, before December has even started. And yet... the temperature has dipped below freezing and we’ve seen some snow upon snow! After the ecumenical Thanksgiving service last Sunday, after being filled with the warmth of worship and music, food and friendship, we came out into gusts of cold wind and snow whirling in our faces. It was a slow drive home as we tried to peer into the darkness past the snow reflected in our headlights.

Winter is disruptive, and so is Advent. After the longest church season, often called Ordinary Time, it seems that suddenly Advent is here! We don’t feel ready. And the Scripture readings really catch us off guard. First, we’re confronted with the extravagant boldness of Isaiah’s prophecy of peace. Then comes Jesus’ urgent warning to keep awake and prepare for his return at an unexpected hour when all will be judged. Two people will be working in the field or grinding meal, and all of a sudden, one will be taken and the other left behind. No matter what you believe about the second coming of Christ, these texts serve to jolt us out of our comfortable everyday routines, so that we will jumpstart our commitment to follow Jesus’ teachings and live into God’s realm.

Paradoxically, Advent is a season that disrupts our lives in order to reveal the truth of God-with-us and God’s call for hope, peace, joy and love on earth. God is coming once again, breaking into our lives in order to renew, redirect, and reshape us for kingdom life. Just as we must get ready for winter, so we must reorient ourselves, consider what changes we are willing to make so that God may birth a new thing through us. What might your spirit need? What does your heart long for? We are at the start of a new church year. How will you prepare for God to come again into your life through Jesus Christ?

The first thing we do together as a church to prepare ourselves is to light the candle of hope on the Advent wreath, the candle that reminds us of ancient prophecies illuminating the present and the future. This small light shines even as it grows colder and darker outside; it shines inside no matter how much snow is falling or how fiercely the wind is blowing.

What could be more disruptive than that, the lighting of the candle of hope in the cold and dark of winter? But you know, that’s how God works in the world. Advent, like winter, is a season of contrasts. Advent is God coming in the bleakness of winter, “God in a birth in the cold.” God coming into a world where “frosty wind made moan,” into a world that moans (1). In Scripture, the Spirit of God is wind and breath and life, brooding over the waters on the first day of creation, descending upon Jesus at his baptism. Wind is passion and hope, inspiring followers on

that first Pentecost, and empowering us as disciples today. God moans with creation through Jesus.

At the same time, God comes into our world as love, the kind that warms us. Look! Inside we sit by a wood fire or wrap ourselves in a soft quilt. We live in the hope that no one has to stay out in the cold, that everyone may know the warmth of such comfort and joy. God comes saying: *Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid. I have called you, and you are mine.*

When you think about it, isn't it a wondrous thing that the cold of winter makes our warm breath visible? Awesome!

Earth stood hard as iron, no longer soft and moist as in other seasons. Still holy ground, but hard. Human hearts can be hard too: stubborn, unkind, cruel. A heart can be so wounded that it knows only bitterness or revenge. "God comes into a hard world. Bethlehem was part of a hard world" (2)--and so it is again today.

This morning, we light the candle of hope and its flame softens the hard wax.

In his Advent meditation book entitled "In the Bleak Midwinter," Herbert Brokering writes: *Incarnation is about God in the real world. God wrapped around cold feet and hands, cold spirits, cold hearts. God among us* (3).

Even in the very cold, we can count on the bright red holly berries and the evergreen trees, their fragrance often reminding us of past winters. And we know what lies beneath the hard earth, the treasure of seeds and bulbs, some of which we ourselves have planted. We remember the wonder of seeing the first crocus emerging from the frosty ground.

Water like a stone: ice. Yes, ice can be dangerous. Be careful, don't fall! In the winter, we can start to feel bleak, weary of ice. Then someone shouts: *Look!* And there is the most splendid icicle you've ever seen, glistening in the sun. Its fragility is part of its beauty, creating a tiny but mighty moment of awe. Remember breaking off an icicle and feeling the hard coldness melting in the warmth of your mouth?

Brokering writes: *One breath and God warms what is too cold. God takes the old. God makes old new. God hears the winter moan / Turns what feels like marble stone / To spirits humming in the winter storm / On fire and feeling very warm* (4).

On Thanksgiving Day, did you exclaim: *Look, it's snowing!* Did you taste your first snowflake of the new church year? Snow gently falling, snow on snow. All is calm, all is bright. Everything covered in a fresh blanket of pure white. The world made new. "God comes like snow on snow"(5).

When snow glitters in the sun, the world does seem brighter. Look! A flash of color as a bird hops by; new tracks of a rabbit or deer in the snow. Look! Rusted car parts and trash piles are transformed into snow sculptures! The wonder of it all. Stillness. Peace. *Come, let us go to the house of the God of Jacob, so that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths.* Swords becoming plowshares, spears into pruning hooks. *Neither shall they learn war anymore.* (Isaiah 2: 2-5).

Long, long ago, God said: “Let there be light, and there was light.” And it was very good. Long ago, Jesus felt the cold of nights in the desert. Jesus knows what it is like to be wounded by hardened hearts. And he still says to us: “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life.*”

Persistent hope in God’s realm has the power to disrupt and change the world. Advent is here.

May the candle of hope shine warmly and brightly within you, so that you glow for others. May you know the wonder and warmth of God’s Spirit in the cold of winter. May you exclaim: Look! Snow on snow--God comes.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

NOTES

Brokering, Herbert. *In The Bleak Midwinter, 40 Meditations and Prayers for Advent and Christmas.* Augsburg Books (Minneapolis, 2008), pp. 1-29. I thank Mr. Brokering very much for the themes (and title) of this sermon.

- 1) pp. 13, 15
- 2) pp. 18-19
- 3) p. 13
- 4) p. 21
- 5) p. 25