

You know what time it is! There's a turkey carcass in your refrigerator, or maybe some Tupperware if you were a guest at someone else's feast; you may have watched a parade, a lot of football, maybe a Hallmark movie (or seven), done some shopping or decorating. And now here we are greeted by the Christmas tree and surrounded by familiar candles and greens and music and this beautiful new banner and chasuble. It's Advent, the beginning of a new church year, and as Cathy said last week, prime time for paradox.

It's a season of preparing our hearts and minds and souls to celebrate the birth of Christ, of waiting for Christmas. So we're seeking mindfulness, peace, a spirit of contemplation, of attunement to the present moment. But of course that is starkly counter-cultural when everything around us outside, the lights, the music, the merchandising—says why wait? Christmas is here! So in one sense it's very clear what time it is, and in another sense it's impossible to tell. Even within these walls, our readings pull us into the past and push us into the future, revisiting the ancient hope of Isaiah and looking ahead to the days to come when war will be no more and all nations will stream together to God's holy mountain. One minute it's seven hundred years before Jesus' birth; the next he's a flutter in Mary's womb, the next, in today's gospel, he's sitting on the Mount of Olives a few days before his crucifixion telling the disciples how he'll come again at an unexpected hour, on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Let's do the time warp again!

As you've heard me say the last two years, I love Advent, and part of the reason is its inherent whiplash, this cognitive dissonance, the layering of levels of time and space as we enter the story. An interview I heard this past week on the public radio show *On Being* has given me a deeper sense of how important this season is. Krista Tippett's guest was the science writer and reporter Erik Vance, the author of *Suggestible You: The Curious Science of Your Brain's Ability to Deceive, Transform, and Heal*. He's interested in what we dismissively call "the placebo effect," the way our bodies respond to something we think is going to make us better, like getting a sugar pill instead of actual medicine. The doctors he interviews take this phenomenon seriously, seeing it as nothing less than unleashing the superpowers of the brain. "We could just call it natural healing, your body's ability to heal itself," Vance suggests. "The human mind is an elaborate, ever changing palace with all these secret passageways we have yet to comprehend." Vance grew up as a Christian Scientist, in a worldview that believes that there is health, there is wholeness, and we just need to live into that truer reality.

This philosophy made Krista Tippett think of Congressman John Lewis recalling that during the Civil Rights Movement, what they had to do mentally was "to live as if the beloved community

was there; it was the true reality and the true wholeness, and you had to act accordingly, even if what was in front of you didn't correspond to that reality." And Vance said that one of the pain doctors he interviewed for his book tells his patients to go back to church, to help "create a sense that good things are coming, that there is an order." And all of that made me think of Advent—these four weeks of holy longing for Christ's coming into our dark and broken world to make all things new. Each year, we hear the visions of the prophets and the stories of Elizabeth, Zechariah, John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph—all of them believing in the reality of that beloved community. Each year we get the chance to re-enter God's bigger story of loving the world into being and entering our human story to bring wholeness and peace and justice. We come to remember that story, to marinate ourselves in that reality and train our eyes to see it.

So today we hear Isaiah's vision of our divided world coming together, transforming its weapons of war into tools for feeding people. We practice believing that Jerusalem—conflicted and violent then as now—can be at unity with itself; we pray for peace within its walls and quietness within its towers. And Paul and Jesus warn us to keep awake, to be ready, to not let ourselves be distracted, numbed, or over-impassioned or we'll miss the signs of God's kingdom breaking in even now, when we might least expect it.

This year at our adult forums in December we're inviting you to join "The Advent Conspiracy," an ecumenical movement of people trying to celebrate Christmas humbly, beautifully and generously. You know my English-major soul loves words, and *con-spiring* literally means breathing together. So we'll be exploring four ways to keep a less frenetic, more Christ-focused season: worship fully, spend less, give more, and love all. If you can't make it to the forums, you can find some resources on our Advent table in the narthex, and we'll link to them in Threads. One idea that has captivated me this year, with the season starting on December 1, is to read one chapter of the Gospel of Luke each day of Advent, starting with Chapter 1 today and finishing with Chapter 24 on Christmas Eve.

Whatever you do or don't do, may these three-and-a-half weeks be a time of joyous expectation; may you be reminded of God's big story and your place in it as a beloved son or daughter; and may you find the simplicity and courage to believe that good is always coming.

Let us pray. "Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen."