

Welcome to Advent! This is the beginning of the New Church Year... And our gospel readings will change. Last year we focused on Mark and this year we will be focusing on Luke.

The ancient symbol of Luke is the Ox. I've come to think of the ox as big and strong and durable... and amazingly powerful... Just like the gospel of Luke. Luke is procedural, it's full of details, stories, and a very engaging writing style. In fact, the writer of Luke also wrote the book of Acts.

Luke is the story of Jesus, and Acts is the story of the church. Together they make a wonderful theological novel. In fact, the confirmation kids and I are reading Luke right now-- one chapter a week!

In the rhythm of the church year, Advent is the season of anticipation, preparation, watchfulness... In our gospel reading we hear about signs, Jesus says, "when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near..." The signs are meant to give hope that a great transformation is coming.

There are a lot of components to hope-- discernment, courage and struggle, watching and certainly waiting. All these elements tug and pull on each other... Sometimes, one person's hope collides with another person's hope. All these things actively pull the future into our reality... Hope can be scary...

In our gospel reading Jesus says, "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory."

I love that phrase, "coming in a cloud." In many biblical stories, clouds are often metaphors for something opaque, in other words something you can see through dimly but not clearly. Kind of like the experience of driving through fog... Hopes are a little like that, sometimes the future looks pretty murky. Advent is the experience of watching for Jesus to come into focus...

Sometimes hope comes to us easily, but most of the time hope is a struggle. The future is not always clear, it risks disappointment, we're afraid of looking foolish, and it always involves waiting... And to be honest, I'm not always the most patient person in the world.

Quick story, a lot of stories of when I was a kid, today... I must be feeling nostalgic... And maybe you've had some similar experiences...

When I was young, my family observed Advent, we had a wreath and every Sunday night we would light one more candle. My dad would lead devotions. It seemed like a big countdown to Christmas... and I'll be honest, I didn't like it...

Time moves slowly when you're young, and it seemed like dangling candy in front of a kid and then yanking it away, again, again, and again... As far as I was concerned, Advent emphasized the waiting, and frankly I didn't like it; it was painful.

I remember the Christmas tree being up after Thanksgiving, and presents would magically appear. One year I hoped for some snowmobile boots. I can't remember if they were a certain brand, but you'll probably remember them with black rubber bottoms, blue nylon upper and felt liners...

And wouldn't you know, one day under the tree, there was a present with my name on it, and it looked just the right size for some new snowmobile boots. I was excited... And uffda-- it was painful to wait... I started telling my friends I was going to get some new snowmobile boots for Christmas!

Well, Christmas finally came. We had a tradition of opening the presents on Christmas morning, and we usually went from oldest to youngest. When it was my turn, I opened the present with so much expectation... And it was a pair of boots alright, **but** not the kind of boots I was hoping for. Instead of the snowmobile boots that all my friends were wearing, I got a pair of boots that looked like girl boots!

My heart was so set on those snowmobile boots... I was angry! My parents felt defensive and tried to convince me they were fashionable. The harder they tried to convince me to wear them, the more convinced I would never wear them. And I didn't... I was not very gracious... I was so afraid that my friends would tease me...

Disappointment is a big part of life. Everyone one of us has experienced the sting of dashed hopes...

We often think about Hope as if it's a passive or a cute thing-- it is not. Hope is a struggle... Hope that is alive is always a work in progress—it has the courage to believe through despair and disappointment. Hope that is alive keeps on plugging away, slowly, procedurally, and sometimes painfully.

Hoping is a continuous spiritual exercise. The business of nurturing our hopes is not an easy task. If you've been burned a few times, it's hard... Advent is about tending those hopes...

What are you hoping for this year? I'm sure each of you has different answers. To someone without a job, it might be employment. To someone with a health problem, it might be healing or wholeness. To someone in depression, it might be connection or meaningfulness. The Advent experience is different for each of us-- and I imagine different each year.

There are little things that I hope for, and some big things too. One of the big things I hope for is peace and justice for all people and for the entire world. Is that too much to hope for? I don't know, but one thing I do know-- the God that Jesus reveals is a God who sees a big picture, and for whom nothing is impossible. This universe is a big project! And it's all God's work...

It is God who gives us hope in a world of despair and presumption. It is God who gives us healing in a world of brokenness and disease. It is God who gives us light in a world of darkness. It is God who brings us love in a world of hatred, and compassion in a world of violence. All miracles, and all around us...

Advent is also the time of hanging on to stories. Stories that inspire hopes and dreams and new beginnings...

Another kid story... It was 1965, I was in second grade, my mom and dad picked us kids up directly after school. For some reason, we didn't have chores to do... All six of us piled into the Plymouth station wagon, and we drove 50 miles to a movie theatre in Saint Cloud. It was spring, the days were getting longer and warmer, there seemed to be some great turning in the air.

I had never been to a movie; I had no idea what to expect. I was just a farm kid; we had a little black and white tv and only got one channel. This was a big deal! My imagination was running a hundred miles an

hour...

The parking lot was crowded. I had never been in a theatre before, the smell of popcorn, the candy, tickets, it was really an adventure. When the movie started, I couldn't believe my eyes. The opening scene, with full color, filmed from a helicopter, Julie Andrews on the top of a Mountain swinging a guitar case, signing that the hills are alive with the sound of music...

I tell you, I was transported to whole new world. I will never forget it. It was indeed a turning in so many ways. On the way back home, my family was buzzing-- laughing and singing. I think my mom and dad saw our family reflected in the Von Trapp family, and there seemed to be a whole new emphasis on family togetherness.

One of my favorite scenes in the movie, Maria's teaching the Von Trapp kids how to sing, the music rises, and she begins, "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start, when we read we begin with A B C, when we sing we begin with doe ray me, doe ray me." I've seen the movie dozens of times, and each time I see it, it just makes me want to sing.

Well, that's what we're doing in Advent. We're preparing to hear the stories all over again, and we're starting at the very beginning. But instead of A B C's and doe, ray, me's, we're hearing the stories that are the building blocks that will inspire our hopes and dreams. Advent is a time of anticipation, a time when our imagination is full of wonder-- a great turning is in the air.

As we prepare for Emmanuel, God with us, as we prepare for the advent of Jesus, what questions do you have this year? What hopes do you have? What dreams do you have for the future? And perhaps even a bigger question is, do you have the courage to dream?

The Christian life is a journey, with many seasons and new beginnings. With each new time we hear the story, with each new insight, or experience, the journey takes on a new beginning and with renewed depth. And along the way, we often experience our hearts opening in sometimes surprising ways.

What if love can actually overcome hatred, fear, greed and violence? What if good news is really good

news? Let's hear the stories again... Let's sing the songs... Let's tend to our Hopes... Let's watch and wait... Because, Jesus is coming...

Amen