

**Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent**  
**St. Ann's, Old Lyme**  
**November 29, 2009**

Every year I am taken aback by the discontinuity between our cultural celebration of Thanksgiving weekend (Who ever thought of the name Black Friday?) and the gospel readings for the First Sunday of Advent. There is pure fantasy on the one hand, and strong doses of reality on the other. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus speaks of dire signs and portents - hope making itself known through the complexity of life and suffering.

Some years ago I had a very strange experience when I began to read the book, **A Map of the World**, by Jane Hamilton. It had been on my list of books to read for quite sometime. Jane Hamilton had grown up in my hometown, was a student of my former teachers and a close friend of my brother-in-law, Kevin. I knew that she was an award-winning author and that this book especially had been well received by critics. But, I had resisted reading the book. I knew it began with the drowning of a young child, Lizzy, and then explored the grief and guilt associated with that death and how that played out in a network of relationships in a small Southern Wisconsin town. I knew that, and I just didn't want to face it.

Nevertheless, one day, there it was on the library shelf my little town library, so I checked it out and began to read it. The author is a gifted storyteller, but I think I may have been right in holding it off - for as I slowly became engaged with the story it was overwhelmingly sad, the hurt and confusion within the characters grabbed my heart. And just when it seemed impossible for there to be more hurt, the young mother, Alice, who had been the one caring for Lizzy when she drowned, was arrested on the charge of abusing a kindergarten student at the school where she was the nurse.

More than once I was tempted to put the book down in order to escape from the complicated world that Alice and her family lived in. A world of pain and strained relationships; a world out of one's control in which innocence is no guarantee of safety; a world in which hard work, and goodness, and love don't protect people from harm; a world in which the effort to live day by day is itself heroic and is itself the process through which meaning is found.

There were times I wanted to flee that world, (it was too real and too intense) and I learned that I wasn't the only one reading that book that felt that way. One night while I was reading, I came to a passage that made no sense. I read it over a few times -- and still it made no sense. Then I looked at the page numbers --- page 200 on the left, page 233 on the right. Smack in the middle of this copy of the book 32 pages were missing - it had been bound incorrectly and no one seemed to have noticed. I realized that everyone else who had checked this copy of the book out, must have stopped before page 200.

You can do that with a book, but this is where our experience of real life and fiction differ. Our real lives don't allow us to close our book before page two hundred and just walk away. Our real lives have to do with complexity and unfairness as well as joy and insight, with failure as much as success, with what we bring on ourselves and are guilty for, with what we are complicit, with what is done to us beyond our control and with what just is. Our real lives have to do with strained relationships as well as supportive ones, with longing and disquiet, with uncertainty and waiting, with illness for which no

one is to blame, with unresolved hurts and unattained desires, with fleeting moments of hope and hours of worry. Our real lives have to do with living one page of our book at a time -- and not putting the book down until the very last page. Real life is what we mark today on the First Sunday of Advent.

Last week I received an email from a priest in the Diocese of Lebombo in Mozambique. Father Juliao wrote me to report on the annual Clergy meeting and Diocesan Family Weekend when people from all over southern Mozambique gather in worship and prayer and fellowship. He told me that many people in Mozambique face starvation this year because of floods in the north and drought in the south. He reported that many congregations go for weeks and months without a visit from a priest of the shortage of priests and the lack of basic transportation to get them to their far flung congregations. He spoke about lack of financial resources to support clergy and their families or to build homes and the simplest of churches. But he also spoke about a church that proclaims good news to the poor and freedom to the captive and continues the ministry of reconciliation, peacemaking, and development in the midst of great hardship.

The good news in our Gospel today is that, despite the fact that we live in the midst of anxiety, in spite of the fact that we might well faint from fear and foreboding of what is happening now or what might be coming upon us and our world, Jesus tells us that we can stand up and raise our heads because our redemption is drawing near. God is writing his Word on our pages, writing His story into ours. One no less than Jesus Himself is our redemption, the true fulfillment of God's love for us, and he is near us even now. The Advent message - is a message for our world - for our stories - for this moment: When things look most frightening, says our Lord, just then is when our lives are closest to God, and God is doing a new thing in our lives.

The Gospel challenges us to live as people who expect God to be near. Now, I know that there are situations in our lives and in the life of the world when the sense of sadness and hurt seem to fly in the face of that reality. In moments when we are bound in fear and hurt and anxiety it is hard to expect the presence of God. That is why it is a challenge -- but it is what the Gospel proclaims: the God of Love -- the God of our creation and our redemption -- is near to us -- as near as the breath which fills our lungs.

That message is what gives me the energy to live. It means that we can look at the dark skies and dark places of our lives as moments of waiting and anticipating God's nearness. It means that we can look afresh on everything that troubles us as signs of God's near and redeeming presence. It means that we do not have to be bound by our fear, and that in facing our fear and frustrations we will come face to face with the living God.

Christ's Advent means that we do not have to fear the next page of our stories because wherever the story line takes us, God will be near. And because God has promised to be near each of us, even the most complicated, the most painful, the most hurtful, the most frightening situations may indeed contain a moment of redemption, a moment of grace, a moment when we will be made whole.

Our redeemer is near – and calls us, in his name, to be near one another. If the Advent challenge to us is to live as a people who expect God to be near, the Advent affirmation is that God wants to transform and make new even the most impossible situations of our lives and of our world. Hope and healing are God's desire for us. For this Christ Jesus was born, for this he lived and died, for this he rose again from the dead, for this he gave to us his Holy Spirit.

Our Advent faith is simply this: to live our lives, one page at a time, trusting that God is near, (indeed in the midst of our story), and that God's presence and promises can see us through all that life can throw at us even to the end of time. Amen

The Rt. Rev. James Curry