

First Sunday of Advent

All Saints Parish, Syr., NY

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Jennifer I. Reid, Ph.D.



Good afternoon/morning everyone.
And Happy Advent!

Our scripture readings this week offer us some powerful images as we embark on our journey toward Xmas. Advent, as we all know, is a time of preparation—preparation for the beauty and magic of Xmas, the anticipation of the arrival of the Christ child coming to be with us and for us, an event we symbolically relive each year.

But our Gospel reading today speaks of another kind of anticipation. It tells us that, as followers of Jesus, we should live constantly in anticipation of the return of Christ and the coming of God’s Kingdom. Almost 1600 years ago St. Augustine expressed one of the most enduring worries Xians have had since the time of the empty tomb: his fear was, he said, that “Jesus might pass by me unnoticed.

Our Gospel readings today and last week, however, address Augustine’s uncertainty, they tell us specifically *how* to avoid having Jesus pass by us unnoticed. Our reading today tells us to “Be constantly on the watch. Stay awake. You do not know when the appointed time will come.” And last weekend we heard those familiar words about *how* to stay awake in order to gain entry into the Kingdom: by feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting prisoners.

Essentially, staying awake is recognizing God’s presence not just in the beauty around us, but especially wherever there is sadness or pain---or as St. Ignatius said, “Seek[ing] God in all things,” to which Jesus in our Gospel reading today adds, ‘and at all times’.

Together our Gospel readings from this week and last week tell us that we should live a fully loving life without pause, as though Christ could return unexpectedly at any moment and ask us how we did. That’s a pretty hefty ask. But as weighty as it seems, I think that our 1st reading today suggests that we have resources within us to be able to do it. It’s as though those resources are sort of in our spiritual DNA.

Our 1st reading from the Book of Isaiah tells us that “we are the clay and [God] is the potter: we are all the work of God’s hands.” I love this metaphor of the potter, where Isaiah is asking us to imagine ourselves as the creations of a master-artist. We’ve all seen images of potters transforming lumps of splattering clay on a potter’s wheel into beautiful works of art—bowls, vases, cups, plates.

Like this one that I just happen to have with me today!





So this is a pottery plate. It looks pretty much like any other plate. It's round. It's flat. It's good and solid—it could certainly support a hefty Xmas dinner. But the reason I'm showing it to you is because it's *not* just any pottery plate. It's a special plate, it's a plate that was made by my mother who spent most of her working life as a professional potter. It's *her* style, *her* glazes that she mixed herself from natural elements to create colour and, of course, if I flip it around, *her* signature on the back of it---it says "I. Reid."

Like every other pottery plate, it's made of clay that comes from the earth. But it also has the imprint of a master-artist on it—there's no question that my mother, and no one else, made this plate or could ever make one quite like it. That's why Isaiah's metaphor is so powerful to me. It tells us that human beings are unique and precious works of art. Like the plates and bowls that I watched my mother create from lumps of clay, we bear the singular imprint of our Creator's hands.

But this isn't the only place in the Bible where our creation is described this way. Isaiah is actually referring us back to the very beginning of the Hebrew Bible (or our Old Testament)---the opening verses of the *Book of Genesis* that tell us that human beings were made by God from *adamah*—*adamah* translates from Hebrew as "soil," "earth," or "clay," the ground beneath our feet.

Isaiah is reminding us that *Genesis* provides us with our first written descriptions in our faith-tradition of both God and of ourselves. But, while we're told that we are made from clay, we're not told a heck of a lot more about either ourselves or God at that point. The principle thing we really learn about God in the opening words of the Bible is that God is a Creator who cares about what's being created.

God creates the water and the land, sea creatures, animals, birds, night and day, the sun and moon. And finally God creates us. But we're given a rather peculiar gift that is also undoubtedly a bit of a burden at times: we're told that we're made in the image and likeness of God. And what is that image and likeness that we were designed to reflect? What *do* we know about the potter who created us from the ground beneath our feet?

As I said, those beautiful opening words of *Genesis* that Isaiah is alluding to don't offer us much to go on. But what we *do* know for certain is that, at the moment of our creation, we were made in the likeness of a God who mostly just loves creating stuff and then loves loving the things that are being created—a God who pauses after all that creating and thinks to God's self, 'Gosh, that's really good'. So, if *Genesis* is to be trusted---if we were made in God's image and likeness, then our basic nature must be to do as God does in those opening verses—to nurture life and love Creation.

As we prepare for Xmas, from prayerful anticipation to buying gifts, to cleaning and cooking, to picking out ugly holiday sweaters for parties we'd maybe rather not attend---let's also keep in mind the other kind of preparation that our Gospel readings have been speaking with us about. The kind of preparation that tells us to "Be constantly on watch," and to "stay awake"---awake to the sacredness of God's Creation and our place in it. Awake to loneliness and sadness, hunger, homelessness, abuse, neglect—all the things that are suffered by our sisters and brothers, and so are also suffered by our God.

To be awake is to have our senses attuned to the world around us, to not be afraid to see, hear, or touch suffering whenever it appears. We don't have to broker peace in the Middle East, though we'd sorely love to. But we can broker peace in our homes and our communities.

We don't have to solve world hunger, but we can work to solve food insecurity in our communities, and we can stop over-consuming and wasting our world's precious resources.

We don't have to visit incarcerated people every day (though our Sr. Maura has shown us that it can be done), but we can stop resisting transitional centers—halfway houses—in our neighborhoods for former inmates.

We can work for the abolition of the death penalty where it still exists in half of this country, or support the work of groups like the Innocence Project that are committed to preventing wrongful convictions and creating equitable systems of justice.

We don't have to find a place in our own houses for every refugee, but we can advocate for the rights of refugees, and for legislation that can make our very big and very affluent nation a home for the dispossessed---just as we imagined it could be when we told the world to send us its “tired,” its “poor,” and its “huddled masses.”

We can be watchful and alert to the needs of all our neighbors so that Jesus doesn't pass by us unnoticed.

And there's no better time in our liturgical calendar to do that than now, as we embark together on our Advent journey toward that most important and precious child who would ultimately ask us just to be what we were meant to be---reflections of our creating and life-affirming God.

Pope Francis recently said that we are called to build “bridges and not walls,” to be “artisans of peace.” Artisans of Peace—like our artisan-Creator, the potter who formed us with the brilliance of an artist's hands, and asks us only to stay awake, to see, hear, touch, love, and care for one another as we were created to do.

Amen.