



Advent 2022

Dear Friends,

Advent is a time of expectation, of looking forward, of anticipation. Advent invites us to wake up and to keep our eyes open to the ways in which God is becoming, and will become, more fully present to us.

This Advent, however, I find myself looking back. The past two years, Advent has looked and felt much different. Our gatherings have been shrouded in the fear of rising COVID numbers and all of the ways in which our normal patterns of being together have been disrupted in order to attend to the safety of one another. In both 2020 and 2021, our parishes were closed to in-person worship just days before Christmas. The negative anticipation of those two Advent seasons was realized in the letdown and disappointment of being unable to be together in our sacred space for one of the most emotional and meaningful times of our church year.

On a personal note, I find myself thinking back a lot right now to this time last year when I was on a caregiver's leave and feeling not only full of worry and concern in my home life, but also cut off from the patterns of prayer and community which so sustain me. I share this because I know that so many people can relate to these experiences of pain and difficulty and of feeling somehow separated from the resources that we most need when we most need them.

I keep sifting through the memories of these last years because it is a reminder of how different things feel now, as well as a framework for understanding and being patient within the things that still don't quite feel "normal." Sometimes we do need to look back in order to look forward, and to do so with some measure of hope and faith too. We are still very much in this pandemic, as health officials and covid rates continually remind us. And yet, a great deal of that heavy fear has lightened; our gatherings and social patterns are renewing; we are getting back into habits of in-person community; we have learned some things and lost some things and, speaking for myself anyway, there has been healing and grace along the way.



“Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst,” the prophet Zephaniah reassured the exiled and uncertain people of Israel. We are people of privilege and blessing, this is true. It is also true that we have journeyed through a time of alienation, fear and isolation. Perhaps that’s why I find myself looking back so much right now—because it helps me to hear how God has been faithful, how God has guided, how God’s word and promise is for me, and for us, too.

As you read this letter, you may relate to that sense of remembering, of considering where you are right now in light of where you have been. You may also feel like you are still very much lost and searching, unsure of next steps, longing for more familiar terrain. Perhaps you are enjoying all of the rebooting of traditions and togetherness, glad for every sign of returned normalcy. Maybe the impact of these last few years, what we have been through collectively or what you have been through personally, is still weighing heavily.

I pray that, whatever pace you are taking in our return to things like in-person gatherings and the friendship and communal prayer of church life, that we all will find that this season of Advent, followed by the celebration of Christmas, allows us to be more fully tuned in to the God of Promise and Faithfulness who is with us in the wilderness *and* the homecoming. I pray, too, that as we continue to attend to one another’s safety and society’s overall well-being, navigating our way through this next part of the pandemic, that the opportunities for being together in prayer and friendship will feel all the more treasured because of having experienced what it is to have spent those many months apart. I imagine that many of us are looking back as we go into this special season, considering how different things feel now and taking stock of the rocky terrain we have navigated. May our remembering help us to look expectantly for God’s love and God’s blessing at work in us. May our remembering strengthen us in the ways of gratitude, generosity, friendship and community.

Yours in Christ,

Martha.