



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
The 1st Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2020
Sermon Title: "Don't Give Up Looking"
Sermon Text: Isaiah 64:1-9

Six years ago, the Sunday before Advent began, Michael and I had gotten some really good news about the future. We were hopeful and excited about a new opportunity and had begun preparing for it. But then Tuesday happened. My life was seemingly completely blown apart by Tuesday when Michael ended up in the hospital with heart trouble. Wednesday had the promise of being better, but Wednesday was worse. And by Thursday, I was taking his wedding band off to prepare him for seven hours of surgery, with him wistful about what he might not see. Hardly a sentence one wants to speak or to hear.

By Sunday, the best I could say was that he had come through surgery and was out of ICU, but with more appointments on the horizon than even he knew. In those days it seemed like the sun was darkened, the moon gave no light, and the stars were making no promises they wouldn't just start falling from the sky. With one daughter in college a couple hours away and one across the Atlantic, I felt truly alone. When we came home from the hospital, as many of you may know, the hard work continued. I have come to see my life as "before surgery and after," in the way we hear people talk about "before COVID" or in your own life perhaps it is "before cancer," "before the accident" or maybe it is something else.

In our city neighborhood, most of our neighbors considered me their pastor even though they did not worship at the church I served. But in the most extraordinary way, they knew, or God knew, that the pastor needed to see Jesus even as the suffering was not yet done. And one day, my neighbor Lisbeth told me, "later today, you'll see Jesus" with a smile. Realizing I seemed confused, she insisted, that though she couldn't tell me when, I would see Jesus and something to comfort me. In a day filled with medicines, comfort keeping, and a visiting nurse for my beloved, I found myself wondering about this visiting Jesus. And I looked out the window periodically, to see just what Lisbeth had meant, especially when I saw her Jeep drive by. Even as I was exhausted, I didn't give up looking for whatever this hope might be. Now that I am six years later, and facing this same Scripture passage as that year, I can tell you that I have a richer understanding of Jesus' puzzling words.

Sure enough in the early evening, I heard a shuffling sound on the front porch and when I came downstairs and opened the door, by golly, she was right. I got to see Jesus. It wasn't in clouds and great glory the way one might imagine. There, staring at me was an inflatable Jesus, and a six pack from a local microbrew store. Lisbeth waved from down the street and worried it was disrespectful. But I can assure you that the love that moved her to show Jesus to the caregiver spouse/pastor/neighbor was as faithful as any I know. There in that time in my life when I could just as easily have joined the prophet Isaiah in crying out, "can't you tear through all this thick and heavy sky and come down here?" There was the experience of 1st Corinthians- that God will use our spiritual gifts and

strengthen them and us in our waiting. There, just as was promised, God used my "not so sure about Church" neighbor to reflect the Jesus I had talked about.

And as Jesus would say it- "my words will not pass away."

Jesus showed up. Even before that moment, I had been given a way to "keep awake," which I think may best mean "don't give up on looking." Maybe that is what we can share with each other now in this waiting and struggling and uncertainty.

It can be tempting to try to bury ourselves in decorations, and overdoing the season. Yes, I too have pushed the envelope on Christmas. At the same time, however, might we take turns bringing some expression of Jesus to one another? Long after our lights burn out, or the tree is compost, and the cookies are gone, remember Jesus says, "my words will not pass away." I am not discouraging our cultural celebrating. But isn't the heart of what we most need rooted in the question of what does it mean for Jesus to appear now?

Of course, the gospel is Jesus telling his disciples about the day of his return in glory to end all suffering. But there is much more while we wait. I know that the unorthodox visitation of a blow up Jesus may seem beyond our scripture. But is it really any more "beyond us" than Jesus who shows up in bread and wine? Or Jesus who shows up born to a young unwed teenager? Or Jesus who shows up on the road with weary travelers? Or on the beach with broiled fish for breakfast?

I think the heart of this gospel reading after we hear about suffering, and darkness, lack of light, worlds seemingly falling apart and shaken to the core is about looking for more. Pre-Surgery, I could not have imagined what my life during that time would be like. Easy? No. Predictable? Hardly. Enriched? Absolutely. In fact, the moments of our greatest need are the time we should turn closest to God and watch for how the holy will be revealed. That Jesus is near to us. But maybe that is when we most need each other to help.

My neighbor turned me to my God.

Recently one of our members reflected that she didn't always feel like coming to church, but now...now any glimmer that connects her to Jesus and to our community of faith is so much deeper. She feels this way because others have shown her Jesus. So much so she looks forward with longing to the day when a greater fullness can be known and shared.

Pre-2020 perhaps our Advent was on auto-pilot. Time honored and treasured but not really anything unexpected. Singing about the baby to be born. Perhaps avoiding the second coming of Christ because it sounds confusing or conflicting. And in honesty, I too have often cringed a little and thought, "Jesus there are so many things still to do- don't come yet."

Now I really do say- "tear open the sky and come because we need you in all this suffering."

But in the meantime, since we cannot know when or how, maybe it is the best thing in this time, in our waiting and in our watching and in our hoping, to not give up on looking. Looking for Jesus and participating in holy surprises that usher him in for each other.

Then it really will be an Advent like no other beyond what we ever imagined. Amen,