

Advent 1 B 2011

An old Finnish advent hymn that we're going to sing in a few minutes:

Lost in the night do the people yet languish,
 Longing for morning, the darkness to vanquish,
 Plaintively sighing with hearts full of anguish,
 Will not day come soon? Will not day come soon?

A protest movement is going on and in the news: Occupy Wall Street.

It's not just on Wall Street, but in 46 cities, including Duluth.

They are protesting many things: jobs, political corruption, high salaries.

Primarily, the protest is about injustices built into our economic /political system.

The top 10% of the American people hold more than 70% of the wealth.

In 1980, the average CEO made 40 times the average salary of their company.

In 2000, the average CEO made 400 times the average salary of their company.

William McDonough said, "There is no economic theory, however farfetched, that can justify that increase. It is grotesquely immoral."

You might expect words like that from a preacher or theology professor.

McDonough is a former bank CEO.

The mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel, said it this way: "If you can't hear the anguish in people's lives, you're too callous for public life."

The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.

There is no hope for change. This is the way of the world, they say.

Any many people think that it actually should be that way.

Lost in the night do the people yet languish.

Locally, I was saddened this month by the shooting of the two dogs.

They were training to be service dogs and were playing on neighbor's property, 150 yards from their own.

In training to be of help to people, they were killed by people, replete with a smile and snicker.

We have to kill dogs for sport and play?

Some people make excuses for it.

Some people say that there is no real hope for change.

That's just the way it is. That's the way of the world.

Lost in the night do the people yet languish.

The molestation charges at Penn State and Syracuse have reawakened our country to the problem of abuse.

It happens on so many fronts and in so many ways.

Some of it is subtle, most of it overt, all of it damaging to spirit.

We can't even protect our children.

The vulnerable are always vulnerable.

Some people argue that there is no real hope of changing that.

So we just have to live with it, because that's the way of the world.

Those who have the power, flaunt it.

Lost in the night do the people yet languish.

Relationships can bring us so much joy and so much pain.

Husbands and wives who can't listen to each other, hear each other, respect each other.

Parents and teenagers who can't listen to each other, hear each other, respect each other.

Bosses and employees who can't listen to each other, hear each other, respect each other.

Our self-centeredness, our lack of compassion, our own emotional turmoil, blocks us from enjoying the life-giving relationships that God intends for us.

Lost in the night.

Even the Christmas season can be a time of darkness.

Instead of being a time of joy, some people experience it as a time of stress and extra burden.

Concerts of Christmas music become just one more thing to do.

I don't know if I have time.

Christmas parties: do I have to go?

It won't help my hollow heart and empty spirit.

The shopping for gifts, instead of being about the delight of sharing love with another, becomes suffering to endure.

This week, we had Black Friday.

As I heard one person say it earlier this week, "It's going to be ugly out there."

So much for the joy of Christmas.

That becomes our routine, the way it is year after year.

There is no real hope for change.

Lost in the night.

That may be the way of the world.
But that cannot be the way of the Church.
We refuse to accept that there is no hope for change.
We refuse to believe that nothing can be done about injustice.
We refuse to believe that caring and right behavior and respect are passé.
We refuse to give up our faith that says in Christ all things are made new.
We light candles in Advent because we are a people of hope.

Paul wrote to a church in the midst of a culture like our own.
The church in Corinth lived among people who said that there was no time for something fresh and new.
It was a society rooted in self-indulgence and self-absorption.
Nothing could change.
There was nothing new under the sun.
There was nothing new for which to hope.
Everything was as it will always be.
Does any of that ring true in your own heart?

But Paul in the Bible reminds us that we are people who live with an entirely different set of expectations.
The words which he addressed to the church in Corinth he also addresses to the church in Virginia:
“I give thanks to God for you because of the grace of God given you in Christ Jesus.
You have been enriched by him.
You are not lacking in any spiritual gift.
He will strengthen you to the end.
You have been called into fellowship with Jesus.”

With the Christians of Corinth, we are those who call upon the name of the Lord.
We are the people who know something of the love of God showered upon the world through Jesus.
Because of that, we live expectantly. We live hopefully.

Chapter 13 in St. Mark’s Gospel is sometimes called “The Little Apocalypse.”
That means we will find there some of Jesus’ saying about the end time, and what we should do in the mean time.

At the beginning of chapter 13, Jesus led the disciples to the temple in Jerusalem. The disciples were enamored by the scale and beauty of it.

They had a "Little Red Riding Hood" moment, exclaiming, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (13:1).

Jesus' response is to teach about the temple's coming destruction (13:2).

False messiahs and false prophets will profane the temple along with many tribulations.

The temple will cease to be the location of God.

So where are we to look for God if not the temple?

The answer is for us not to look in the temple but on the cross.

Not in the city proper but outside the city walls.

Not in the center of power and authority of people, but in the mercy and grace of God.

A little apocalyptic is more than appropriate to begin our waiting season of Advent.

At the heart of apocalyptic literature is encouragement and hope.

That which looks like devastation and defeat will ultimately be God's victory.

Out of the theological turmoil and confusion surrounding the destruction of the temple will arise a new presence of God.

Out of the suffering and death of the Messiah will be new life.

God's new way of being in the world will turn a cross into resurrection and a baby in a manger into salvation for the world.

Lost in the night do the people yet languish. Will not day come soon?

I'll tell you about daylight, people. His name is Jesus.

Advent is a countdown to Jesus:

- His arrival in the world 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem
- His presence in the world today
- His second coming at the end of time

And what does it look like when that day dawns?

- Injustice crumbles
- Abuse is not tolerated
- Grief is overcome
- The walls of alienation crumble
- Love overcomes hate

That's how it will be, because Christ, the Savior of the world, makes it so.

We live in the light of that reality now.
As followers of Christ, we await the promise of his coming in fullness.
We anticipate a decisive turn of events in the realm of human hearts.
And we work for such.
That is our hope. That is our prayer.

The Quarterly newsletter of Gustavus Adolphus College arrived this week.
I let out a “wow” when I read one article.

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A candle is lit.

To be sure, we falter and stumble.

But the good news of the promises of the gospel is that God will be faithful to the very end.

Our hope does not reside in us, but in our faithful God who has graciously opened the doors of God’s heart and let Jesus walk among us.

God’s faithful words to us in Jesus will always be true.

So light a candle, friends.

Be a people of hope.

Because the day of Jesus is coming soon.