

Help is on the Way
The First Sunday of Advent
November 28, 2021
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Years ago, while running a small business I had a week in which a number of things weren't going well, and a particular morning when all the pressures seemed to be closing in on me. In the middle of trying to put out all the fires I got a call from my friend Marvin, who told me that he was at the end of his rope and desperately needed a friend with whom to talk. He asked me to drive to Hattiesburg, Mississippi to meet him for lunch. So, I dropped what I was doing and drove an hour to meet him for lunch.

When I got there, we sat down and I said, 'Well, Marvin. Tell me about your problems.' He said, 'Paul, actually things are going well for me now. I called because I was worried about you. And I knew the only way you would come is if I told you that I was the one having problems.' While it was a trick, it was a good trick. It was so helpful for me to get sixty miles away from my problems and the outing with Marvin helped me to put them in perspective and to see them in a new light. But the biggest help to me was knowing that I had a friend who cared, a friend who knew me well enough to devise a clever plan to help me through a tough time.

In our Gospel passage from Luke, Jesus describes a time of disaster. Scholars have argued for centuries over whether these things have already happened, are happening, or will happen. There is a sense in which all three are true. We can certainly identify with disastrous times in the here and now.

We are now into our twentieth month of COVID, we have seen disastrous hurricanes to our south and out-of-control wildfires to our west, and a week-and-a-half ago many of us felt tremors from an earthquake in Missouri.

We can sometimes get too caught up in trying to determine the time frame Jesus is talking about or bury our heads in the disaster-of-the-moment. We can easily miss the promise that Jesus is giving us.

In his acclaimed paraphrase, the Message Bible, Eugene Peterson translates the posture we need to take and the promise Jesus is offering in Luke this way: 'When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!'

In essence, that is the message of this season of Advent. It is a time for us to stand up, to watch keenly, to wait with anticipation. It is a time for us to claim the promise that help is on the way in

the form of a child coming at Christmas to redeem and liberate us from disaster. But there is also a sense in which help is not only on the way, it is already here. Jesus is always present with us.

In the parable of the fig tree Jesus sees the summer of ripeness and full maturity already present in the earliest sprouting of the leaves. He is with us, not just at the glorious end, but in the birth pangs of beginning, in the muck and messiness of growth, and in the everyday journey of life.

Advent, and life for that matter, are not only about Jesus coming to us. They are also about us coming to him. Are we willing to draw near to him in faith? Are we willing to acknowledge and to accept help beyond what we can do for ourselves?

If my friend Marvin had said, 'Paul, I sense you're going through a rough time. Why don't you come over to talk about it over lunch?' I probably would have said no. I was too filled with pride. I felt those burdens were mine alone. I was determined that I could figure a way out of them. When I thought it was Marvin who was in trouble my instinct to help someone else came through. But a part of why I went may also have been pride. I may have thought, 'Not only can I solve my problems, I can help Marvin with his problems too.'

Part of this season of Advent is an invitation to humility. There is something humbling about waiting. It often means that there is someone ahead of us in line. We learn that we aren't first, nor are we the center of the universe. We learn too that there is someone outside ourselves that we need, and that someone is worth the wait. Jesus warns us not to be weighed down with the worries of this life. Otherwise, we might miss his coming and perhaps miss his presence that is with us right now.

Marvin probably did have some worries that day. But he put them aside and took the time and had the perception to spot a friend in need. Then he acted upon his impulse to do something to help someone beyond himself.

The posture of looking down and the mindset of thinking about our own concerns keeps us from noticing those in need around us. I think that is why Jesus emphasizes posture in this passage. He tells the disciples and us to stand up, to raise our heads, to be on guard, to be alert, and to be in prayer. It is then that we spot the help Jesus is bringing to us and the opportunities to be that help for someone else. I am forever grateful to Marvin for calling me that day.

As we begin this new church year and this season of Advent it is reassuring to know that help is on the way! And it is already here. *Amen.*