

Kate writes about "The Wisdom of Expectation" in her message for the First Sunday of Advent. It is based on Isaiah 64:1-8 and Mark 13:24-37. She offers it here with a prayer that we keep our souls open to expectation and possibility, the possibility of love, change, and healing during this holy season.

*Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

I wonder what it would have been like to be a first century Christian living with the expectation that Jesus was about to return at any moment. Would I have watched the skies anxious to detect any change in the sunlight? When the wind picked up would I have looked for angels coming to gather the faithful? Would a shooting star have me convinced that this is it? And would this be **comforting**...or **frightening**?

The answer would likely depend upon what life was like then. If I lived in constant danger – of starvation, of arrest, or of whatever threat loomed in first century life, I expect this day could not come soon enough. I'd have nothing to lose and everything to gain. But if my life was fairly comfortable, with family and friends and good work, I might not be so anxious to have it all gone in one great cosmological conflagration!

Perhaps we can understand the varied reactions to the upheaval in Ferguson, Missouri, these last weeks this way. Many of the protesters speak of lives lived in fear - fear of confrontation, recrimination, fear of imprisonment and early death. For them, the outside chaos now matches the inside; it has become visible for all the world to see. I imagine it is almost a relief. And for those who have **not** lived with that tension or fear, they are angry to get this taste of it. And of course they are, **no one** wants to live in hopelessness and fear.

The early Christians did get it wrong in thinking that Jesus would return during their lifetimes to set their world right, and eventually they knew it. We see that in the back peddling of the scripture texts in which they are advised

not to worry about those who die before this happens, they will be taken care of. But, were they wrong to live with that **keen sense of expectation**? The expectation that God could show up in the next second, around the next corner, and something earth shattering would happen? I don't think so.

After ten years as your pastor, you know by now that I relish the celebration of the liturgical year and its seasons. We begin a new one today with Advent. I refuse to let these four weeks be gobbled up by the commercial celebration of Christmas. And it's not because I am no fun or like the power of being the liturgical police. The reason is this: I understand the primary call of a pastor to be the care of **souls**. Not to administrate a church. Not even to change the world, although whole and healthy souls go right out and do that. A pastor's primary concern is the soul – that mysterious place where flesh and spirit meet, where we sense and experience God. By extension my responsibility is the care of the soul of this church, this community of faith, and the life of the Spirit that flows in and out of us.

. A pastor's primary concern  
is the soul –  
that mysterious place  
where flesh and spirit meet,  
where we sense  
and experience God.

The seasons of the liturgical year are basically an invitation to dig deep into the various aspects, or what I call the movements, of the soul where we engage with Spirit. The

invitation is given in many ways – through color, sound, music, light, even smells. It is a whole body engagement meant to clear the path for an experience of the One who holds us all in life and death and loves us beyond all telling.

The words of the Scripture start the digging...the urgent plea of the prophet Isaiah that God would just break on in. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...that the mountains would quake at your presence!” The world has gone awry and we are powerless to intervene. From Ferguson, to ISIS, to Boko Haram, to the poverty in our own cities and countryside, to the ravages of ALS and AIDS, Mental Illness, Cancer and Ebola, to the violence in our homes and hatred building up in hearts. Advent begins in the admission of the despair we live with and in as innocents are slaughtered and loved ones suffer and we do not know what to do. This season begins where our own chaos becomes visible.

There are two things we can do when the trials of the world threaten our hope – we can shut them out and shut down and join the dance of denial. We can build a wall around our vulnerability, and dive right into the culture’s Christmas which has been created **just for this purpose**, and buy and party ourselves into oblivion. **Or** we can listen to Jesus in the gospel of Mark – “**Stay awake! Keep watch! Keep alert!**” There is more going on in this world than you know. Do **not** numb yourself to the possibility that a force greater than any other can and will break through at any moment. And you must be ready to grab hold of it, become a part of it, let it become a living part of you. **Love**, the ultimate creative force in the universe, is coming and no one and nothing can stop it. But we can prepare for it...and it can move mountains.

This is what it means to live with expectation. It has nothing to do with denial or sugar-coating. It leaves the door open, sometimes painfully open, to the soul and allows the possibility of hope. The cynic would say, “Why bother?” Nothing is ever going to change. The Christian formed in the season of Advent would say it is **just** at the

point of the deepest night that we can begin to see the light.

Now, it is not always easy to live with expectation. We fear hopes being dashed and longings left unanswered. But my dear friends, when we share our longings and speak our hope in a **community of expectation**, something astonishing happens. Our **communal soul**, that mysterious place where spirit meets flesh, becomes as visible as the world’s chaos. It breaks through cynicism and fear, shining a light straight through the darkness. In that light we begin to see God at work, assuring us that love is stronger than anything that threatens to undo us.

When you are out and about during this busy and beautiful season, I want you to do something for me. Seek the light of our steeple. Look for it sending a beacon into the night. And know that a powerful love, a transformative love, is coming...and let that expectation steal into your soul. Amen.

When you are out and about  
during this busy and  
beautiful season,  
I want you to do something  
for me.  
Seek the light of our steeple.  
Look for it sending  
a beacon into the night.  
And know that a powerful love,  
a transformative love,  
is coming...  
and let that expectation  
steal into your soul.

