

What is the worst thing you've experienced in your life? Maybe it is the loss of a loved one, a time of financial difficulty, or personal health crisis. As part of a greater community and nation, most of us know what it is to live through times of economic instability, wars & terrorism, social injustice and even a global pandemic. Across the globe we witness humanity at odds with itself; people wielding violence, some in the name of power and dominion, others in the name of God.

The brokenness we see in the world around us can cause us to feel overwhelmed, to lose hope. For centuries, God's people have cried out, "how long, O Lord", and still, the question remains unanswered. In our longing for our and the world's suffering to cease, we may ask: When will Christ's promised reign of peace come? And, in

this season of Advent, how does a weary world rejoice?

In our lesson from Isaiah, we hear as the prophet calls out to God, pleading for God to relent in his anger and to look with forgiveness upon his children. Isaiah appeals to God to restore and reshape his people, like a potter working clay with his hands. Israel suffers; their world has fallen apart, the temple is in ruins, and the people have felt God's wrath and absence. And so, with great reverence, the prophet asks for mercy and that God might deliver God's people from the depths of their brokenness.

Within our Psalm we hear the same sentiment: "Restore us, O Lord God of Hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved." Fast forward to today, and this is still the prayer of

God's people: that God's promise of salvation and peace may quickly come. But when?

Sometimes it can feel like the end of the world is coming. Jesus himself talks of the end: stars falling from heaven, the darkening of the sun, fiery devastation, all signs of the end times. He tells of earth and humanity-shattering events to come that will devastate individuals & families, and communities & nations throughout the world. We know all too well the pain and hopelessness we feel when any of our human family suffers. Some may point to such things as signs of the end, yet Jesus calls for caution.

Michael Toy, a PhD Candidate in Religious Studies notes: "It is impossible to fix our eyes on the moment of the Christ's return. And so we remain in uncertainty, in unknowing. And in that uncertainty the invitation before us is to fix our

eyes upon the one thing we can: the person and promise of Jesus Christ.” (1)

In part four of her poem *Sometimes*, poet and Episcopalian Mary Oliver offers simple instructions on how we might live a life present to God, especially one in which we encounter God in the present moment, even as we anticipate the unknown someday to come. She suggests:

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it. (2)*

There is much going on around us worth noticing, things that would take our breath away if only we took pause to pay attention. How might our lives be enriched were we to intentionally choose to take time to connect with God as we seek and soak in the beauty and rich complexity of

humanity and all creation. We might be awed by what we see. We might, in fact, be astonished!

Today, we have entered into Advent, a season of anticipation, reflection, and intentional noticing as we make ourselves ready: for Christ's coming and coming again. Jesus says to us: Beware! Keep alert! Pay Attention!

But honestly, sometimes it's hard to stay present. We can become unconscious of God. The weariness of the world and life's concerns may overwhelm us, leaving us tired, weary and numb, disconnected from God and short of energy and hope—effectively asleep. In such a state of spiritual unconsciousness, we may lose sight of Jesus and the hope he brings.

Into our slumber, Jesus sounds the wake-up call. "Be alert and ready," he says, "for yes, heaven and earth will pass away; nations will battle nations,

people will act out, but my words will not pass away.” Christ’s words are ours to claim; there to comfort, guide and assure us, especially in times of fear or uncertainty. His words are balm for a weary world, and they call us to take notice, to be conscious of God’s presence, and in our noticing, to be astonished by all that God has done for us in and through the person of Jesus. Jesus then invites us to transform our astonishment into gratitude, and with hopeful anticipation, to tell of it — to herald the good news of Christ’s coming to the world.

Like the fig tree, which has no idea of when summer will come, yet springs forth leaves in anticipation of it drawing near, we cannot know

when Christ will return. Near is as close as we are going to get in this life, but we can imagine and anticipate.

And so, in this first week of the Advent season, I invite you to:

Pay attention,

Be Astonished,

And to Share your Astonishment with others.

Take notice of God's nearness to you. Take notice of one another. With gratitude and wonder, open your eyes, ears, hearts and minds to see bear witness to God at work in the world, and hold tight to the hope of Christ's return, when without a doubt we will surely be astonished.

(1) Michael Toy, *Bearing Witness*

(2) *Something*, Mary Oliver