

Welcome to the first Sunday in Advent. Not only are we starting a new season in the church, but we are also beginning a new year. The past couple of weeks I've tried to reinforce the idea that this is the beginning of the new year with the confirmands. I've said it a number of times in our services. But, it's an important distinction that I don't think we really focus on.

Over the years, I've had a few discussions about the new year. I had one conversation that really made me think. In fact I still think about it from time to time, generally around the beginning of a new year.

I was talking with one of my friends about celebrating Chinese New Year. We were discussing why culturally they celebrated both the lunar and regular calendars. And this led into a discussion about celebrating the Christian new year.

The more we talked the more people that joined our conversation. Each of us were from different backgrounds and different beliefs and practices. Almost always, the self proclaimed Atheist will argue that the Christian calendar shows how none of the dates and holidays actually match up with how Jesus' life would have actually occurred. But, in this group, a devout Christian that argued against holidays.

His point for the new year was that it should start after Easter and not during Advent. He believed that Christianity truly started with Jesus' death. It was in his death that our sins were forgiven and were assured our place in heaven and not the Christ child's miracle birth.

I understand the point that he was trying to make. And I understand some of the other theories about how and why the year should or should not start with Advent. It is a fun discussion to have in theory, but in reality the decision was made a long time ago and it would take a lot of work to change it if anyone really wanted to.

What I have also found interesting was how easy it is for us to approach Advent and make changes compared to the new calendar year. In Advent, people are generally happier and nicer to one another, especially as the days get closer to Christmas. It is natural and fluid, especially as children, when you know that Santa is watching and you are trying to make up for something you did during the rest of the year.

But, for the calendar year, we make resolutions to change. We find things that we don't like about ourselves and force ourselves to change. In some cases we get angrier and more short tempered as we do this until we finally give up and move on. If only we carried on the Christmas spirit throughout the rest of the year instead.

In Advent our hope and our faith as a whole is so much stronger than the rest of the year. When I say as a whole, I'm not talking about everyone sitting in the pews or watching our feed. I'm talking about the rest of the world. The spiritual people that don't believe they are religious, but they put up a tree and a manger. The atheists that cross themselves when they pass in front of a church. Or the unsolicited Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays from strangers.

Today we lit the first Advent candle, the hope candle. This candle is a symbol of our hope in Jesus Christ. Our hope that is fueled by the Holy Spirit and guides us through love and faith. I think it is important to note the difference between hope and faith in this situation.

In today's reading from Habakkuk, we see the importance of having hope and faith. Habakkuk is one of the few prophets that doesn't talk about the future. He addresses God directly about what is happening all around him. His story is more personal and individualized.

In Chapter 1 he starts off talking about how he is overwhelmed by all of the violence going on around him. He is disgusted by the random acts of violence and the blind eye that justice turns on some. Do you see similarities in what is going on in the world today? We have war and mass shootings all around us. Innocent lives, God's children, are being taken every day.

And what can we do about this? Well, we do the same thing that he did. We pray on it. We voice our concerns and frustrations and we pray. We see his prayer in the first chapter. He asks God why he tolerates this? Why does God turn a blind eye when he points out wrongdoings?

At some point in your life, haven't you asked God questions like these? I know I have. God, how can that murderer walk free when he killed so many innocent people? Why did that child have to die so young? How can that rapist walk free when so many women came forward and shared the horrors that he put them through? It can be hard to continue having faith when you see these atrocities continue to happen.

Habakkuk Chapter 2 gives us God's response. God says that we need to be patient. He tells Habakkuk to write his vision or question down and God will answer his prayer. The permanence of his written vision serves as an anchor to God. He might not answer when or how we want him to, but he will answer. And as long as we continue to live as the righteous and keep our faith, we will be rewarded.

That's easier said than done sometimes, isn't it? We know what God is capable of. We have read various stories in the Old Testament depicting his wrath and vengeance. But now he asks us to wait and be patient. We need to have faith in him that he will answer our prayers, and that he will do the right thing.

But, it's easy to lose faith. It's easy to question all around us and feel depressed and question every aspect of God. We can lose sight of his greatness because of all the evil and wrong surrounding us.

One of my favorite literary characters frequently says that he doesn't have faith because faith is fickle and can change in the wind. He has hope because it was brought from God and burns deep within him. Much like our hope candle.

Habakkuk praises God at the end. He sings in rejoice about his faith in God and how much he loves him. He knows that God will guide him and protect. He just needs to wait long enough for it to happen.

That is sound advice that we can all learn from. We need to practice patience when we think that God isn't listening. There are 7.8 billion people in the world that are talking to him. We might be a little further down that list than we would like to be. But if we continue to live following our hope and faith, he will answer.

In the lounge today, I set up a basket. That basket is for you. It is there so that you can write a message to God about a concern you have. As in today's reading, write your concern so that both you and he can see it. And place it in the basket for both of you.

Keep your faith and hope burning bright, practice patience and God will be there for us. We already know what he is capable of. We are anticipating the birth of his son and our savior. His love and guidance are there waiting for us to hear them. Amen.