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We are living in a time of global turmoil as we watch some democracies being taken apart while other ones erode socially, culturally and economically. As democracies come apart or falter, international world leaders scramble to figure out how to save the democratic system and its values, while thwarting off external and internal threats. At this time in the history of the world, the most urgent and dire threats to democracy are internal. Nationalist and populist forces are gaining power and turning to autocratic behavior in such countries as Italy, Austria, Poland and the U.S. People living in various democratic nations are expressing the view that their democratic governments are not serving them well.

International conversations such as those held at the 2018 Copenhagen Democracy Summit in June have called for world leaders who are social innovators as well as creative and concerned about the underrepresented. Because the planet and all communities of life are living in the midst of climate change that is wreaking havoc in many parts of the world, leaders will have to be people willing to make the just and ethical decisions needed to assure quality of life and sustainability for all creation. The needs are great; the demands are even greater; and the geopolitical and environmental crises are beyond human comprehension.

In ancient biblical times, people faced similar crises to those we face today. In the midst of wars, with empires usurping power and lands from one another, the Israelites looked for good and just leadership. In this Sunday's first reading, the biblical writer speaks about a divinely promised new leader who will do what is just and right and bring peace and security to the land of Israel and Judah.

In Psalm 95, the psalmist desires to know God's ways. This God whom the psalmist addresses is not only one to whom the psalmist can relate personally but also one whose paths are worthy to be followed. For the psalmist, justice, kindness and constancy characterize God's paths for those who walk in God's way — keeping the covenant and the divine decrees. Those who love God will also experience God's friendship. For the psalmist, then, the community is to follow the ways of God and not the ways of the corrupt leaders of the day.

The second reading found in the First Letter to the Thessalonians focuses on the core element needed within the Christian community, and likewise, within the world today for the sake of the common good of all. This core element is love. Paul, the supposed author of this letter, defines for the Christian community a social and religious ideology that involves loving one another. Christ has already attested to the way of love, and his followers have already received the apostolic directives. The Christian community is to lead by example, and their power as a group of people is to be transformative

and not oppressive. In this way, others can experience the community's holiness and become the recipients of their loving actions.

The theme of redeeming and transformative power is the central message of Luke's Gospel. The Gospel writer envisions a time when the world will be turned upside down, signaled by cosmic events in the sun, moon and stars. Cosmic convulsions will accompany the coming of the divine One known as the Son of Man. Life as it is known will be changed, with judgment and redemption occurring simultaneously.

In sum, this Sunday's readings invite us to ponder our world situation and our need for new kinds of leaders. An unwavering commitment to practicing justice complemented by love is the order of the day. Finally, as a Christian community called to live in communion with Christ, we are to be the embodiment of the redeeming powers of the divine One, shaking up the world as we confront the powers of human oppression.

The time of realized eschatology is now, and today begins the spirit of the second coming. Are we ready to participate in the mission?

JEREMIAH 33:14-16

The vocation and mission of the prophet is not only to expose and rail against injustice but also to offer a word of hope and a vision for a new day. In today's first reading, we hear from a selection from Jeremiah which is sometimes called the "Book of Consolation" (Chapters 30-33). Therein, the poet features Jeremiah, a prophet, delivering a divine message, an eschatological promise that rests on the horizon.

The backdrop to this text is the imminent Babylonian invasion into Judah which will result in the destruction of the Temple and the holy city Jerusalem, the collapse of the monarchy, and the fall of the southern kingdom, Judah. The northern kingdom, Israel, has already been destroyed. Such a catastrophic invasion will cause not only the death of many Judahites but also their exile to Babylon and Egypt.

Thus, with perilous times soon to befall Judah, Jeremiah's message becomes a word of divine reassurance and comfort for a people about to undergo a horrific experience. The message also serves as a reminder to the people that annihilation and destruction will not be the final words or deeds. When God fulfills the promise made to the house of Israel and Judah, the monarchy will be restored, and through the good governance of a new leader, one like David, Judah will one day be safe and Jerusalem secure.

The promise made to the house of Israel and Judah refers to the covenant with David (2 Samuel 7:1-17). That covenant promised peace and security for the Israelites; offspring after David from his own issue that would be raised up; and a Davidic house and kingdom established forever.

The image of a new shoot, sprouting from the stump of an old tree, fits the situation of the truncated Davidic dynasty. This promise to be fulfilled will happen because of God's initiative.

The phrase "The Lord our justice" refers to the new name that Jerusalem will be called. Jerusalem, a city once filled with corrupt political, social and religious leaders will be made new. Jerusalem, a city to bear the unjust invasion of the Babylonians who will completely pillage and destroy it, will be vindicated and will be restored. Justice will be served to Jerusalem.

Finally, the new leader to be raised up in David's place will be someone who exercises justice and righteousness, the fruits of which will be peace in the land. Today, many nations wait for new leaders who will govern well for the sake of the common good.

PSALM 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14

The theme of justice heard in the reading from Jeremiah also plays a role in Psalm 25 where the psalmist proclaims that God guides the humble to justice and teaches the humble the divine way. Classified as a psalm of petition and an acrostic, this poem expresses trust in God whom the psalmist views as teacher, savior and friend. For the psalmist, God is not a deity who delights in punishment for those who break God's law and ordinances. God is a deity whose goodness and uprightness become known through divine instruction.

In the first stanza, the psalmist expresses a sincere desire to know God's ways and to be guided in divine truth. The psalmist spends every waking moment for God.

In the second stanza, the psalmist affirms God, the one who shows sinners the way and guides the humble to justice. The psalmist makes clear that sinners are not judged or condemned; they are divinely nurtured. The psalmist also offers a lesson on humility. For those who have this virtue, they are divinely favored. Not caught up in their own pride, arrogance or self-serving importance, those who are humble are open to learning. Their hearts are not hardened, and their lives are not centered around upholding the status quo, making a name for themselves, or satisfying their own self-interests.

Embedded in this stanza is a word of good news. God is not interested in only those who are humble. God is also interested in sinners. Divine opportunity becomes theirs as well. In our world today, where many Christian denominations point their finger of judgment at those whom they consider sinners, this part of the psalm is a wake-up call. If the deity can be receptive to transgressors, then so must God's people especially those who deem themselves "righteous" and "just." The psalmist calls God "good" and "upright" because this God is ultimately a God of compassion; all are welcomed to learn the ways of the divine.

Surprisingly, when the text is heard against the grain, the self-righteous become the sinners because they lack compassion and hospitality of heart. Though they think they know God's ways and are walking in God's paths, they really are not. If they were, then the virtue of humility would be the corrective to their self-righteousness.

The last stanza of the psalm expresses relationship. Those who keep God's covenant and decrees will enjoy divine favor. Furthermore, those who love God will enjoy God's friendship. "Fear" of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is understood as "love" of God. The covenant to which the psalmist refers is the covenant at Sinai recorded in the Book of Exodus (6:7). This covenant is a mutual one of fidelity between God and God's people. The law is the sign of that covenant meant to preserve the people's right relationship with God, with one another, and with all creation. Keeping the law was tied to the people's well-being and for the preservation of peace in the land. (See Deuteronomy 6:1-3.) Hence, both the reading from Jeremiah and Psalm 25 celebrate God's fidelity to God's people. They are hopeful messages in these global chaotic times.

1 THESSALONIANS 3:12—4:2

Just as God remains faithful and loving toward all, so must God's people, particularly if they belong to Christianity that has received the teachings of Christ handed down throughout the centuries. Couched in the form of a prayer, Paul's address to the Thessalonians expresses his concern that they may not only grow in faith but also abound in love. For Paul, "love for one another and for all" expresses a profound ecclesiological reality characteristic of being a "Christian" and a "Christian community."

While Paul is interested in the here and now, he was not altogether preoccupied with this present life. His prayer looks forward to the Parousia, the second coming of Christ. Thus, the prayer has an apocalyptic tone. In the apocalyptic genre, the reference to "holy ones" is typically understood as angelic helpers. Paul's reference to the Parousia underscores the relationship that exists between the present and the future.

Paul concludes this part of his letter and prayer with an exhortation. He wants the Christian community at Thessalonica, many of whom are new converts, to live according to their calling and what they have learned. They are to remember the apostolic directives given to them and to put those directives in to practice. The directives, of course, center around a life of active love for all as demonstrated by Christ in the Gospels and taught through the preaching and teaching of the apostles. All people then become the beneficiaries of Christian love that is meant to be inclusive and transformative.

Finally, the Parousia typically points to the future second coming of Christ but if understood in the context of embodied spirituality and realized eschatology, then Christ's second coming begins in the here and now. As Christians' lives become more deeply rooted in and give expression to love, so they become more fully in communion with Christ and, ultimately, in union with God. A life fully transformed by and through love is a life that bears witness to Christ and God among us. The Parousia is meant to unfold in the here and now and not just in some future time.

LUKE 21:25-28, 34-36

This portion of Luke's Gospel is part of a larger apocalyptic discourse (Luke 21:5-38). Apocalyptic writing was popular in Jewish and Christian circles for a millennium or more. The focus is on eschatology, the end of the world as we now experience it and the beginning of a new world. Usually, the transition is described in terms of transformations that are cosmic in scope and nature. Judgment upon oppressive persons and institutions and the vindication of those made to suffer by such people and institutions are part of the apocalyptic agenda. Amid painful and prolonged suffering, when no hope on the horizon can be seen, writers often employ the apocalyptic genre. They turn the suffering faithful ones' faith toward the heavens and by doing so, they offer a vision of the end of the present misery and the beginning of the new age to come. Such is the genre and methodology of the Gospel writer of this passage from Luke.

Preceding this passage is the prediction of the fall of Jerusalem (21:20-24), an event that had occurred about 10 to 20 years prior to the writing of the Gospel. What the Gospel writer relates in this earlier passage are the events that happened somewhere around 66-70 C.E. when the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. The passage in the Gospel is written, however, in a way that makes both events seem as if they have not happened yet when in reality, the writer of Luke is writing the Gospel in hindsight.

Having featured Jesus delivering such harrowing news to his listeners and followers, the writer of Luke now portrays Jesus offering a word of comfort. Even though everyone and everything is coming apart at the seams, the collapse of the powerful ones, namely, the political and religious leaders of the day and their power structures that have long caused oppression and pain to the common folk, is a good occurrence. Thus, today's Gospel reading speaks about the turmoil that is to happen as the reign of God — the new age — is ushered in.

In the context of our world today, where certain leaders are amassing more and more power as people suffer under oppressive regimes, and where corrupt religious, political, economic and social institutions are failing and crumbling, we who hear today's readings are challenged to live lives of active love and to shore up that which is supposed to work for the common good such as democracy as a model of government.

Like Luke's Parousia image of Christ, we are called to usher in the new day, the new age. Redemption from oppression starts now, and we Christians, baptized into Christ, are called to embody Christ and move the apostolic mission forward in our world. The reign of God is at hand now, and we have no other choice but to hasten its coming by working for justice throughout our world.

Planning: First Sunday of Advent

By Lawrence Mick

Advent does not start until December this year, a hint that the season will be shorter than last year, when we had a full four weeks. This year, the fourth week of Advent only lasts two days. So it is important to observe the season well as long as it lasts.

How will the assembly know that it is Advent when they arrive at church today? Has all Thanksgiving décor been removed? Is the worship space simple and restrained? Does purple appear prominently? Are there any indications outside the church building that the season has begun — on doors or banners?

Advent is not penitential to the degree that Lent is, but it is still a preparatory season. Its mood is joyful, but it is a restrained joy, even mixed with lament. We might call it an anticipatory joy, based on our faith in God to hear our laments and heal our lives and our world. Advent is a season of "the already but the not yet," rejoicing that the kingdom is already in our midst but aware that it has not yet arrived in its fullness.

The Gospel for this First Sunday of Advent reminds us that all is not well with our world (if the news reports have not already made that quite clear to us). Read these words again in light of the ecological issues we face: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world” Is your parish doing all it can to address climate issues and care for creation? Some petitions on that theme would be appropriate. We have traditionally thought of the end of the world as something God will bring about, but between nuclear weapons and climate change, we humans seem more and more capable of ending the world ourselves, at least the world as we know it.

These are serious issues and we need to pray and preach and educate and work to address them in every parish and every community. Yet we draw hope from God’s promise that God will strengthen our hearts at the Lord’s coming and that our “redemption is at hand.”

Saturday this week is the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the patronal feast of the United States. For that reason, it is not one of the holydays that loses its obligatory character when it falls on Saturday or Monday, so planners need to give it due attention. A Mass on Friday evening could draw those who spend their Saturdays on errands and sports, while a Saturday morning celebration might draw a different group. Texts are found under December 8 in the Missal and at the very end of the Sunday Lectionary.

Prayers: First Sunday of Advent

By Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Has there ever been a time when someone has not yearned for God — or anyone — to bring about justice? The signs of the times still clearly reflect the pain of those who suffer. This season calls us to the same awareness as those who walked before us. We demonstrate Christ’s presence by courageously advocating for justice, security and peace for all people.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you called the disciples to notice the signs of fear and persecution: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you offered hope in times of fear and persecution: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us now to the same awareness and vigilance: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now to be open to Christ’s redemptive presence and his demands upon us.

Minister For the church that we may be signs of Christ’s ongoing presence by witnessing on behalf of all who suffer injustice, we pray:

- For the desire to reject hatred, pessimism and fear by demonstrating love, hope and compassion for all people, especially those who make us uncomfortable, we pray:
- For the wisdom and generosity to embrace and practice Christianity without diminishing those who believe or think differently, we pray:
- For the courage to observe this season as more than a time for holiday commercialism or sentimentalism, we pray:

- For the courage to address the serious issues of caring for the Earth for the coming generations, we pray:
- For the determination to teach our children the real gifts of kindness, generosity and regard for those who are different from us, we pray:
- For all those in this community whose illness, grieving or personal needs overshadow Advent yearning and hope ... *(names)*... we pray:

Presider God who calls us to be watchful and aware, direct our focus to what really matters in a season of frequent distraction. Make us people who not only hope, but are willing to be conscious of and address the injustices suffered by others. Remind us that people do not see Christ's presence if they do not see it in us. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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