

Today is Advent Sunday, the beginning of the journey to the manger and the start of another church year. Last week we celebrated Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the liturgical year. We looked back on our faith journey these past twelve months and the changes that have occurred in our church.

Few of these changes could have been predicted but they are the reality we are called on to face with confidence and assurance of God's journeying with us on the path to the future.

This morning we lit the candle of hope on the Advent Wreath. Hope is a key element in the church's journey as we ever strive to follow the call of Christ to discipleship in these times of change. God has never promised a life without the movement of events we can not control. However, he has and does promise to be there with us as we face the uncertain future. God is our source of certainty and calm in our collective and personal lives.

The prophet Isaiah in our reading this morning said the following: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." This use of light to describe God and later Christ is significant. While the sun on the sky may be the source of light by day, God is the light of the world always and that light can not be extinguished.

Also in Isaiah we read: "Lift up your eyes round about, and see."

Isaiah was always trying to get the people of his day to open their eyes to the reality of what was around them. How can you be so blind, he would ask. How is it that you look and yet can not see the glory of God? Open your eyes and see the light of the world for it is before you and all around you. "Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice" says Isaiah.

These words of Isaiah are good words to open the advent season for us. The story of the promise of God to deliver his Son and the unfolding of events which leads to the birth of Jesus, require us each year to open our eyes and see again the wonder of this event. If you but open your eyes and truly see, says Isaiah, then you will be thrilled by what you experience and it will become new again.

Today we shift our thinking to the Christmas experience. For those of us who believe, it will not be more of the same for we will challenge ourselves to discover the story afresh and once again draw near to kneel at the manger with the angels, shepherds and wise men.

Then we also come this day to the reality of the end of Jesus' earthly life. We too are invited to participate in the Last Supper with Jesus along side of the countless numbers of the faithful who through the centuries sat at table and remembered the sacrifice and glory of Jesus who we call the Christ.

Like Peter and the others, we often tremble with fear about the events which may lay ahead for us. We like the comfort of what we know and do not welcome change easily. But Jesus called us to be a forward people, a people of courage and faith. If God would send me to earth to dwell with you, says Jesus, to die and to experience your life so that you might know the depth and wonder of God's love, then be not afraid for God is always with you, offering encouragement and forgiveness.

As Isaiah said, Lift up your eyes, open them wide and see. See and believe in a loving and all powerful God, a Creator God who from our inception has loved and cared for us. So be not afraid of what is to come for I am with you to the end of time.

So we come to the Lord's Table to experience and enact again, the great sacrifice of Jesus that we might have life and have it in full abundance.

Do you read the sign boards in front of many church buildings? Some of them are cute, some are funny and yet others hit home with the truth for us. I saw one this week in Belleville. The sign read: "A Safe Place For Change". To me this was a powerful message of what the church is and should be – a safe place for change, a place where a person can discover God and commit their life to Christ within the sanctity of a people of love, understanding and faith. Are we that kind of place? Do we see our church as a place where change is permitted and possible?

Open your eyes and see said Isaiah, the wonders God can perform in the lives of people and in our own heart.

It is my hope that all of us will enjoy the anticipation of Christmas this year. May we avoid the cynicism so prevalent these days and not be discouraged by some of the commercial excesses we experience this month. Christmas, that expectation and excitement of the coming of the Christ child can only be taken from us if we allow it to happen. Let us open our eyes and see the hand of God tracing itself through history and leading us on into his future.

And as we take part once again today in the act of Holy Communion, let us also open our eyes to see the host of this meal, our Lord Jesus Christ. Feel the joy of being an invited guest in God's feast, a celebration of his creation and love.

This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased said the Lord God. Come and sit down and enter into the joy of the Lord. With an invitation like that, need we fear the future?

No, I rather think we should stand before God eager to hold his hand as we move forward in love, humility and excitement. Amen

Rev. Gary Magarrell