

Grace and peace to you from the One who can do all things except fail - Our Savior, Jesus the Christ. I bring you greetings on behalf of Bishop Amy Odgren and the entire NEMN Synod staff. Thank you for your invitation to be with you today as we take time to sit in ceremony together with God.

Please pray with me.

God, Stir up your Spirit that lives within us. Reveal your plan and steer us so that we walk in humbleness on the path that you invite us to travel. Open our eyes so we can see your vision for humanity and all of creation. Soften our hearts so that they might be compelled into action and open our ears to the teachings that you have prepared for us to hear so that we may live in the way of Jesus, the Messiah. Amen

Christmas songs fill the radio, ads flood the Internet, lights twinkle in the darkness, gifts are being purchased and wrapped, and plans for celebrations are being made. "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas."

But what does Christmas look like? The carefully crafted marketing we experience each day paints us a picture - holiday sweaters, matching pajamas, fluffy white snow, immaculately decorated lives complete with mistletoe and sappy movies and travel destinations. Everything at our fingertips all for the low low price of... This is what Christmas looks like, right?

According to today's lessons, no. Today, we are reminded that the world we existing everyday and the wilds we are invited to follow Jesus into often can be very different.

In the Christmas picture painted by today's stories of faith, we see swords pounded into plowshares, and spears beaten into pruning hooks. I don't know about you but plows and pruning shears haven't yet made it into my Christmas ornament box.

But, maybe they should. Maybe it would do me some good to have symbols of what it looks like to shift away from warring against each other and towards living in relationship with the land hanging on my tree or adorning my mantel. Maybe we need tangible reminders that God in Jesus has invited us to turn away from the things that create division and pain between us - things that separate us from each other - things like quarreling, jealousy, treating our bodies with little to no respect, and living into selfishness and self-righteousness. All those things that make it difficult to see the path God invites us to walk. Maybe this is what Christmas looks like.

Our lessons today teach us that because of Christmas we have been set apart - invited to walk in a way that nurtures healthy growth and promotes new life. We are asked to live life differently than those who don't follow in the way of Jesus, spreading light not darkness, doing all the things that need to be done, but never losing sight of the fact that God is forever near. So, we must always be vigilant. We must always expect the unexpected. And this, we are reminded is precisely what Christmas looks like.

Today is the first day of Advent. Advent is the season of hope-filled preparation, leading up to the season of Christmas. Advent asks us to take personal inventory as we look toward the promise that we have in Christ. Advent's close cousin is Lent and like Lent, Advent is a journey into deeper awareness of God's love alive and present in this world and how we must work to reflect that love in and through all that we do. Advent invites us to be hope's light in a dark world, beacons of possibility to those floundering in seas of uncertainty. Advent points us to who we are because God's ways are not our ways. It recenters us, refocusing our eyes on God's breaking in so that all that is fractured in our lives and this world may be repaired to reflect God's vision for creation.

Advent reveals to us where we have fallen short and invites us to envision how we might work side by side with God to repair the world's brokenness in love. Advent is a journey - a journey of reflection and invitation and the possibility of love revealed. It is a journey of hope.

When we remember that this journey, this process of reflecting with God, this time of reordering, of breaking in, of lighting up the dark and shadowy places, when we remember that this is God's invitation to prepare for God's coming into the world -

When we place our attention on the process of growth obtained on that journey -

When we embrace the parallels between Advent and Lent, then we can likewise embrace that today's lessons are as much what Christmas looks like as everything else we have learned to associate with Christmas and we can fully experience Advent as God renewing our wonder, fanning the flames on our willingness to hope for a better world.

And we, like the rest of creation, could use some hope right now.

I spend a lot of time talking to people about the state of the church. So often, when I go to national and even international meetings, the conversations tilt towards the church's future. When I visit congregations, members often share about their worries for their own congregation's future. They see decreasing numbers - fewer people in worship, fewer people volunteering, fewer resources all around. There are so many

conversations about what will happen in the church and I can't help but wonder - what is going to happen in the world.

How is it my bothers and sisters that the world is not seeing the light of Christ in and through us? How is it that we who follow the prince of peace are still short on plowshares and pruning hooks? How is it that survey after survey indicates that ever increasing numbers of people under the age of 65 don't see the church as relevant or a faith community as something they need in their lives?

Maybe, we aren't so different from the communities referenced in today's stories. The story from today's Gospel tells us that the day is coming when God will sift out the people, and I believe that day is both coming and is already here. Already we can see that some are being left behind as we focus inwardly on our own needs. Already we can see that some are wandering off in darkness not seeing a light to follow. Already we can see that some among us have placed higher priority on our own needs - the busyness of church life - than they place on the needs of others - Christ's servant lifestyle, business of church life. We see it in our world. We feel it in our congregations. We begin to embrace it as truth.

But, Advent helps us reboot. It creates space for us to remember that no matter how tired or worn out - no matter how many times we need reminding or how often we mess things up, we are the ones chosen to live differently in this world -
We are the community that sets aside our personal desires for the betterment of the world -
We are the ones that strive to live in harmony and peace -
Our community is comprised of the ones who God snatched up from the field and away from the grinding mill.
We are the community invited to spread Christ's light into the world.

Advent reveals to us both who we are and helps us see who God invites us to be. It opens our ears to the pleas of our neighbor - pleas for justice, righteousness, love and mercy. Advent gives us room to lament the fact that we don't feel the kingdom of God here on earth. It allows us to cry out,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

Advent strengthens us. It makes us remember that we, as a church, have been invited to build God's Kingdom, the place where community, healthy community, community

that is willing to do better exists on this Earth. Advent points us to Christmas and Christmas shows us that with God all things are possible.

So, we need Advent, pregnant with possibilities, so we can say with confidence...that the community the tired world is looking for is already here! Light has overcome darkness. Hope exists. New life is possible.

It's God's Kingdom. It's in me. It's in you. It's in the Church and we are relevant.

We are the people invited to spread justice, mercy and peace into the world, the people love each other and lean into each other and sacrifice for each other, holding each other up during the hard times...determined to make life better for everyone...committed to benefiting everybody whether we know them or not.

My siblings in Christ, we are that community, the one the world is longing for. We are the kingdom of God right here on earth because of our baptism. This is our neighborhood - the place where Christ planted his church to serve the world and because we are here, people should see difference.

God's Kingdom right here on earth - light in darkness; possibilities where none seem possible; peace not conflict; healing not division; plowshares not swords; pruning hooks not spears; love of neighbor and denial of self. People are looking for that kind of community. That kind of community is relevant in this divided and broken world. It is near - in you and in me. May people see it shine brightly soon.

My brothers and sisters, I pray that this Advent season your journey will develop deep within you a desire to be ready - to be ready to deny yourself for the sake of your neighbor, be ready to put down your weapons in exchange for tools that nurture life, be ready to go when the Spirit invites you. I pray that you will be ready to be transformed so that the world will see you as relevant because all of creation needs the promises God has fulfilled in and through Jesus. The world needs the peace and hope and possibilities that we know in Jesus. Amen.