

**LONGINGS**  
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November 27, 2016  
First Sunday in Advent  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Isaiah 2:1-5**

*Nations shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

**Matthew 24:36-44**

*Jesus said: For as in the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man ("the Human One"). Keep awake*

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This is the season of Advent. It's a time to give voice to our longings despite the gloom we may feel.

The gospel lesson for this First Sunday of Advent begins in gloom. It depicts an apocalyptic destruction of the world Jesus and his people knew and counted on. The Temple in Jerusalem would soon be pulverized by the Empire's storm troopers, said Jesus.

What many considered indestructible, holy and dear would be destroyed overnight. Many of us know that feeling. Worlds end in more ways than one. Sometimes suddenly.

I know many of you feel the loss of someone who once filled your world with joy. I know many of you feel the loss of a country that once filled you with pride and hope. Worlds end in more ways than one.

The temple in Jerusalem would soon be pulverized by the Empire's storm troopers, said Jesus.

Impossible, cried his disciples. That can't happen.

Yes, it can. Yes, it will. The world you trust will end. You can count on that. But do not be afraid. It is not the end of all things.

Stay awake. Don't slip into despair or a drunken stupor. For at an unexpected hour the Son of Man shall come, which it to say, the truly humane spirit within you shall arise.

And it's true: we've seen glimpses of it arising time and time again in the wake of national and international disasters. People can be amazingly compassionate and resilient.

As the Apostle puts it in another lesson for this Sunday: *salvation is closer than you think. The night is far gone; the day is at hand* (Romans 13:11-14). It's not about something outside coming toward us. It's more about the darkness inside giving way to light.

Jesus understood darkness as prelude to light and destruction as prelude to creation. You can see it in the crucifixion and what came next.

We may think it's the end. But it's just the beginning, the beginning of something new. It's labor pains on the eve of birth. True humanity is about to show its face, not out of the clouds above but right within our own hearts.

Salvation is closer than you think.

Not the salvation that takes a "chosen few" out of this world into heavenly realms as the "Left Behind" advocates gleefully proclaim. Not *that* kind of salvation. But rather the

salvation that liberates us from fear and hopelessness, jolts us awake, and puts courage in our backbones here and now.

Wake up. Love is knocking on your door.

Some hear the knock and step out into the way of love. Some are left behind, at least for the moment.

Then as now destruction was on the horizon but nearly everyone ignored the warnings. After all, the sun came up every morning. Why worry about those distant clouds on the other horizon?

It's like the days of Noah, said Jesus. In those days they went about their lives, eating and drinking, feasting on bread and circuses until it was too late. *It's getting better all the time*, they sang. And they ignored the warnings. They missed the ark of salvation, the shelter against the storm.

*Wake up*, is the cry of Jesus. *Wake up*, is the cry of Advent.

Keep awake. Do not give up or give in—keep working and praying for peace, justice, healing and freedom for all.

As today Psalm puts it:

*Pray for the peace of the world! May peace reign among all peoples, and dwell within every heart! Then will friends and neighbors, and former enemies as well, cry out, "Peace be within you!"*  
Psalm 122 (Nan Merrill)

This is the season of Advent. It's a time to give voice to our longings, to let our hearts cry out. *O come, O come, Emmanuel and set us free*. It's the longing for peace when nations will beat swords into plowshares and study war no more.

No, it doesn't look so good at the moment. ISIS rages on. Terror reigns. Nuclear warheads stand in silos. Warships prowl the seas. Threats are hurled against one group or another. Minorities of one sort or another are terrified. Our nation is torn apart.

But our longing for peace remains.

And so we pray for the peace of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, for Mosul and Aleppo, for Paris and Beijing, for Washington, Chicago and Los Angeles, for Orlando and Ferguson.

May swords be beaten into plows. *And may our own verbal swords and spears with which we constantly wound others be beaten into words of healing and grace*.

Advent is a time of longing for things large and small, for things distant and close.

And so we also pray for those who sit among us longing for comfort despite endless grief, longing for a break after months of joblessness, longing for relief from relentless diseases, longing for a miracle for a precious little grandchild, longing for reconciliation in a broken family, longing for acceptance from heartless parents, longing for mercy in a harsh and often cold world.

This is the season of Advent. It's a time to give voice to our longings and let our hearts cry out. Those longings give shape, form and body to the Spirit of Christ within.