

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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LISTENING FOR ANGELS

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Text of a Sermon preached on the 1st Sunday of Advent

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ISAIAH 64:1-9 | PSALM 80:1-7.16-18

I CORINTHIANS 1:3-9 | MARK 13:24-37

Happy New Year! On this day, the first Sunday in Advent, we Christians have this strange and wonderful tradition of resetting our spiritual clocks. We begin our reckoning with time by reminding ourselves that God is on his way, that God will show up at any minute, that now is time to get ready.

Ready for what? Angels are coming! Coming upon the four winds, to gather those who are awake, those who are longing for this day. Are you ready for the sound of an angel's voice riding on the wind? One of the greatest poems of all times begins with just this question: If I cry out to the angels, do they hear me? If an angel cries out, will I hear it? (Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*)

Consider. Those listening to Jesus' striking words, just before his arrest, are about to miss it. They themselves are about to fall asleep. The tragic irony of Jesus words should not be lost. Everyone listening is about to fall away, to deny him, to lose hope. One will betray him in the evening, another run away at midnight, yet another deny him at cockcrow, and the rest lose all hope at dawn – just before all will be revealed in the glorious passion of the Cross.

They will, we will see the fulfillment of his words on the Cross: 'the son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory'. Indeed, then, as now, the fulfillment comes in a way we least expect, at a time we cannot know, at a time we can just hope to be prepared for.

Christ is died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Our new year begins with an emphasis on revelation, on a longing for light to shine in dark places. Imagine an angel coming for you. Will that awesome being give you just enough time to gather your things, settle your accounts, say good bye? Or rather, will that flaming light show you what you have always possessed, forgive every debt, and get you ready for an even more surprising encounter.

Angels are bearers of God's messages, they are witnesses to God's hidden activity, that in a moment of beauty or terror, is revealed. They reveal what God is doing in secret. Most of what God is working in us right now is hidden from us. Short of the final judgment, we can pray that God show us what is there in our lives, but just outside our field of vision.

In Advent, in this season where the church invites you, begs you, to reset your spiritual clock, you can count on important things coming to light. That is, if you get in the spirit of things. If you see preparation and planning, waiting and watching, as spiritual disciplines of an open heart and an open mind.

Scripture, and biology, tells us we reap what we sow. But that is only part of the process. Also, all the time, waking or sleeping, living things are sown in us. Our bodies end up with completely new cells every seven years. These changes are not only generated from within, but also are floating on the wind of our desires and dreams. Also find us in the demands for justice and for relief. In the hope we have, or discover, for those we love, and for everyone else who we either joyfully receive as our neighbor, or think to exclude.

A new year is a time to sow, to turn over the earth, to prepare the ground. But it is also a time to receive the rain, the gravitational forces of the sun and the moon, and the nutrients brought to us on the wind. A new spiritual year is a time to wait actively, preparing and planning for some of the things you know you need, and some of the things you didn't know you will need but will be glad to discover.

Remember, angels are being dispatched to the four winds. There will be news of a child on the way, a vaccine that needs sharing throughout the world, a neighbor who needs our help, a stranger who needs welcoming.

The key that opens the wonders of Advent, the gifts of a new spiritual season for us, is kindling our own hearts desire. The prophet Isaiah, the Psalmist, and the apostle Paul, do not just accept their plight, their trial. Though everything IS out of our control, we must engage our passion, our longing for God to act. This is the practice of listening for angels.

From our quarantines we pray for something, anything to happen, for the necessary thing to happen. "O that you would tear heavens open and come down, that the mountains would quake" - just like in the olden times! Anything, Lord is better than fruitless waiting. Give us fruitful waiting!

For as Scripture says, when "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."

Angels are being dispatched. It is our job today to listen for them. We are to get ready for an encounter that is not just about the last judgment. We are to prepare for an encounter that will transform us, bit by bit, step by step, from creatures with blind and dark places, to creatures filled with love and light.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.