

## **God's Reign Is at Hand First Sunday of Advent - 2016**

**Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It is a time of the year when we are reminded to prepare because God's reign is at hand. Jesus, whose "name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace" will soon be here.**

**We are told that we must prepare. We must, as we heard in the Book of Romans and Isaiah, "... conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and lust, not in rivalry and jealousy." We must "beat [our] swords into plowshares and [our] spears into pruning hooks."**

**Well that doesn't sound like much fun. It sounds like a lot of work.**

**But what does it really mean to prepare?**

**Well, I think preparation includes endeavoring to be peacemakers. We must "beat our swords into plowshares". We must do what we can to promote reconciliation, to find common ground, to promote unity.**

**Our world is deeply broken. There are places, in our world, like Zambia and Namibia where hunger is rampant, where "children have no bread but tears and weary wait for morning". There are places like Aleppo, Syria, where "war-horns sound their warning" and even children's hospitals become targets. In our own country, there is misogyny, xenophobia, racism, homophobia, and hatred that have only gotten worse in recent weeks. There are movements like the alt-right that publicly assert their desire to segregate the races. They assert that the races just are different and can't ever really get along. They maintain that the United States has its basis in white Europeans and that we should restrict immigration to those emigrating from Europe.**

**Indeed, our world is broken. Arguably, our world is so broken that its only hope is for all of us, i.e. much of humanity, to work together. We must try to understand the other. We must bridge differences. We must reconcile. We must work to advance**

**common goals. In other words, if we want God's reign to be at hand, we must work together to make it so.**

**And this brings me to my central point. I believe that helping to bring God's reign to fruition requires reconciliation but reconciliation requires self-understanding.**

**You know, during recent the last few weeks, I have not used Facebook, not watched MSNBC or CNN, and limited time spent listening to or reading the news. I do read the Globe and the New York Times online. I do listen to NPR. But I have significantly reduced my exposure to "news".**

**I did this because the "news" was making me too anxious and angry and afraid. I decided that my level of anger and anxiety was excessive. I just felt bad and was only hurting myself and maybe others.**

**I believe that we, and not just us here but people everywhere, must work to temper our emotions, our fear, anxiety and anger. We will not be able to bridge differences otherwise. We will not be able to work with others to bring about the reign of God. This is not to say that we should never be angry but that we must sometimes quiet our emotions**

**Quieting our emotions may not be easy. I do not find it so. We must each find what works best, what vehicles assist us in understanding ourselves, what helps us identify what we feel and why we feel it. We must find a way to put feelings into perspective. For me, music helps – playing it, singing it, listening to it, particularly classical and spa music (think Agua Viva and Jane with the rain stick). Music is a way for me to let go.**

**Another technique that works for me that perhaps will work for you is called "Leaves on a stream". Maybe some of you have heard of it. It works like this. You begin by focusing on breathing. You take a few minutes just to observe how the breath is entering and leaving your body. Afterward, you visualize a stream filled with leaves; and one by one, you place your thoughts and your feelings on leaves in the stream. You do this for all your thoughts and feelings, good, bad or neither; and**

**you just watch the leaves for a while. Perhaps they flow down the stream out of sight. Perhaps not. For a while, you just continue placing your thoughts and feelings on the leaves in the stream and watch them**

**The result for me is perspective and greater calm. It isn't that the fears or anxieties or anger go away exactly. Instead, it is that I see them, recognize them for what they are and place within the greater context of life. I find that this technique helps even in situations that arise suddenly, when I am not actively practicing "leaves on a stream". I find that I notice what I am feeling; and this is very helpful in deciding how to act, in deciding what to do and how to do it.**

**The other consequence of my work is my realization that we live a paradox. As evident through our anxiety, fear and anger, we know that we live at a time when God's reign is yet to be. Our world is deeply broken and there is much to be done. Yet, as evident to me when I do Leaves on a Stream, when we still ourselves and take the time to notice, God's reign is now.**

**Have you ever listened to music being sung or played and felt goose bumps? That is God's reign, the connection of the eternal to something essential and deep within. Have you ever had your face licked by a loyal and loving dog or smelled an apple pie freshly baked? God's reign is at hand. In the dark of the night, have you ever looked up at in wonder at the stars and seen Orion's belt? God's reign is at hand. God's reign is at hand when a loved one gives you a heartfelt and unexpected complement and brings you to tears. God's reign is at hand when you share your gifts and bring joy and meaning into other people's lives and you know that your gift is simultaneously both your gift and also God-given**

**So whether through "Leaves on a Stream" or music or something else, I hope during Advent that you work on yourself, that you try to understand yourself and thereby position yourself better to help bring reconciliation to our world. I hope during Advent, as Romans advises, that you and I will "throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" that we will work to bring God's reign to fruition. But life is too short; and I hope from time to time during Advent that we will**

**notice that God's reign is already at hand**