

## “Standing on Tiptoes”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park

November 27, 2011/ First Sunday of Advent

Texts: Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

Here we are! Thanksgiving is behind us. We now stand on the threshold of one of the most wonderful and the most stressful times of the year! Many of us feel nostalgic for Christmases past, while others are struggling to find balance between job, family, and friends. Some of us cannot wait to rush to the manger and adore the sweet little baby, while others feel trapped in the pain and hurt which is more real and more evident than ever. Yet, regardless, the world around us is in full swing. Our mail-boxes and TV screens are filled with Christmas advertisements: *“Want to be merry? Use our reward visa card! Buy, buy, buy! You will be happy, your loved ones will be happy.”*

It is in such a time as this that we, the church, enter a new season, a new year. And the lessons put before us on this first Sunday of Advent sound rather gritty. In our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah cries out to God: *“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.”* (Isaiah 64:1) Tearful and desperate, our psalmist also cries out, *“O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? Stir up your might. Come to save us!”* (Psalm 80: 4, 2) In our Gospel lesson, Jesus depicts a gloomy picture: *“The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”* (Mark 13:24-25)

Yes, my friends, today on this first Sunday of the new liturgical year, the church tells us that this is where we need to begin, not with sanitized fairy tales, not with the happy, wealthy, and dreamy image of cultural Christmas. We need to begin with weeping and wailing, with our dry, dark, dangerous, and desperate lives exposed and laid bare. Yes, my friends, this is where we begin, with Advent, with its truth and honesty. When the world calls out for self-indulgence, we submit ourselves to self-examination. Today, we begin a new church year, not in a dreamy place, not with sugar plums dancing in our heads, but with broken and contrite hearts, in a painful and truthful place of disturbance, desolation, and deformation.

As our prophet Isaiah appeals for God's presence in our first lesson today, Israel was under all powerful Babylonia rule. The Temple was destroyed, and the throne of David toppled. The people were forced to live in captivity. When the exiles were eventually allowed to return from Babylon, they were filled with high hopes. But, alas, nothing seemed to happen. The recovery did not happen magically. It was a hard, slow work. The Temple still laid in ruin, and people lost heart. They felt abandoned. They thought that their struggle was evidence of God's desertion.

Some six hundred years later, in the first century Jewish world, people were struggling again, this time, under the brutal subjugation of the Roman Empire. They rose up against their oppressors, waged a war, and fought with a great deal of enthusiasm and expectation. However, it ended on a very different note, with devastating battles and massive loss of life. After a long siege, the Roman armies broke through the city walls and destroyed Jerusalem, the holy city, including the holy of the holy, the Temple itself.

Imagine yourselves among the people in Isaiah's time or in that first century Jewish world. Your hope for recovery or victory is dashed. Your dream of a free, independent, and prosperous nation is shattered. How would you have felt? How would you have responded? We certainly do not live under Roman or Babylonian oppressors. But I believe that to a certain extent we can relate to Israel's feelings, their frustration, anger, and despair. Many of us feel overwhelmed with forces beyond our control - health issues, economic issues, life change issues, to name a few. Many of us struggle with the powers that disturb us, diminish us, oppress us, and keep us in captivity.

I was here at the church last Thursday evening. We were open for the overnight shelter program, as we are on every Thursday, October through April. I saw some familiar faces, I saw many new faces. Some were loaded with suit cases or plastic shopping bags, others walked in just with a purse or a briefcase or without any belongings. Many were individuals, but we also had a couple of families with children. As they were being checked in, many of them said "*Happy Thanksgiving*" to the PADS volunteers and staff. I was standing there at the entrance as our guests walked in, but I did not have the strength and courage to wish them a "*Happy Thanksgiving*" myself. What is there for them to be happy about and grateful for on a Thanksgiving Day in an overnight shelter? A place to spend the night with a mattress and a blanket and a warm meal? Yes, but, do they represent real answers to their real problems? Is that what they need to have a life of justice and dignity?

Please do not get me wrong. I am deeply grateful for your willingness to serve the hurting world by opening our church for the homeless in the community. I am grateful for and proud of you, generous givers and willing volunteers. Yet, at the same time, I long for a world in which we will not need shelters at all. I long for a world in which everyone can support their families through meaningful work. I long for a world in which injustice will be no more, poverty will be no more, oppression will be no more, war will be no more, hatred will be no more, abuse will be no more, disease will be no more, despair will be no more. With the people of Israel thousands of years ago, I, too, weep and wail. I, too, long to see the face of God. I, too, implore, "*Stir up your might, O God! Tear open the heavens and come down! Save us and restore us!*"

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells us, "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.*" (Mark 13:31-33) And Paul affirms in his letter that God is faithful, that God will strengthen us to the end, that we will not lack any spiritual gifts as we wait for the revealing of our Lord Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:1-9).

And so, together, as a community of faith, we stand on our tiptoes today. Together, as a church, we light one candle today - the first candle in the Advent wreath. What difference can a small candle make in this darkened world? What different can a small candle make in brightly lit buildings, streets, and shopping malls? Yet, we light a candle, not because we are by nature optimistic, but because we are a people of faith -- we have heard God's promise and we have known God's grace. Standing on our tiptoes, we light a candle today, resolved to stay awake, determined to be on the lookout for the movement of God.

However dark the world may seem, however helpless, hopeless, or just plain heartbroken we may feel, we light a candle today. We choose to be the people of the emerging realm of God, right here, right now. Standing on our tiptoes, we light a candle today, ready to catch its flame and carry it wherever we go, taking hope with us to share. Let all God's people standing on their tiptoes say, Amen!