

Good morning, God's people!

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Advent.

Advent, as a season, doesn't make a lot of sense.

It's the beginning of the church year but comes at the ending of the calendar year. And more than just timing, beginnings and endings are both major themes in Advent. A baby being born into the world, a beginning. The coming of the Lord, an ending – maybe *the* ending.

It's not just that Advent is cramming in two very big themes. It's that the different things we hear and sing and pray during Advent seem at odds with one another. If you ask most people who we are getting ready to welcome at Christmas, they would say Baby Jesus. But our first gospel reading for this season features a fully-grown Jesus talking about the end of the world. / This morning, we lit the Advent Wreath, to count down until the day Baby Jesus will arrive. Followed by the gospel where adult Jesus tells us we cannot know the hour the Lord is coming. Now, that wreath and this gospel are talking about two different arrivals, the birth of Christ and then the Second Coming of Christ. But still! That's a lot to hold, isn't it?

The more sophisticated way to talk about things not making sense together is paradox.

Anne Lamott says, "Paradox means you have to keep two wildly different ideas in your head at the same time. This is one too many for some people, including me on bad days," she goes on, "but all truth really is paradox. Entering into paradox, and thus mystery, can be overwhelming. But this is also where new beginnings and hope emerge, side by side with the scary and scrambled."

Advent reminds us that we were made for paradox. That we are made of paradox. We carry joy and grief. We know beginnings and endings. We are marked by brokenness and healing.

While so much in our world flattens us or pushes us to believe either/or, Advent invites us to bring ourselves wholeheartedly into this already/not yet, in-between, paradoxical season that, it turns out, is the one truest to our lives. When we do, we encounter what makes no sense and yet speaks truthfully to our deepest longing: God is with us. Emmanuel.

Now, I know St. Peter's gets paradox. And more than other congregations, you get Advent. You've heard some version of this sermon before. I've probably preached some version of this sermon here before.

I love paradox and the beauty and truth and mystery to which it testifies. But it can stay in the head. Even Lammott houses it there – two wildly different ideas in your head.

How do we *live* Advent? This season so rooted in the body, in the world, in life?

Last weekend, an armed shooter entered Club Q, an LGBTQA+ club in Colorado Springs, and killed five people, injuring 18 more, before two people disarmed him.

More gun violence. More violence against our LGBTQIA+ siblings. What does it look like for the Church to live Advent in the aftermath of this tragedy?

One of the paradoxes of Advent is that we are waiting for Christ to be born into the world while also believing Christ is always present in the world while also knowing Christ has not fully reconciled the world. One does not undo the power and importance of the other.

And so, as Christians, we are called to recognize when things happen that make it seem like God has not come yet. Is absent. Did not arrive in time. To bear witness to suffering and pain, without minimizing or trying to explain it.

We are also called to live in such a way that our lives are a testimony to God's presence. God's reckless and relentless love that is always with us.

The people at Club Q came together to celebrate who they are, who God created them to be. To reject those who try to deny the dignity God gives to every human being. To be a part of something bigger than themselves. To be safe. To be happy. These are the reasons most of us come to church.

And they were terrorized for it. All I could think about is that the people at Club Q went there to dance. Their joy, an act of resistance. Their grief must awaken us to the ways we continue to teach war. The ways God's beloved are pushed to the margins. Over and over again.

Remember, that is where Christ came into the world. On the margins. Where mismatched shepherds and angels gathered at a hole in the wall manger to celebrate love being born into the world. And danced. And we cannot forget that evil and violence tried to destroy those beloved then too.

As Bernice King reminded us earlier this week, "We can drive out hate with love." Again, what does that actually look like? King went on, "We can drive out hate with love[...]online, on the streets, in legislative halls, at the polls, in religious groups, at home, in schools. Love is not weak and passive. It is immersed. Intentional. Inspired. "

How do we *live* Advent? It's the first Sunday in Advent, so there is time for us to be with this question. To dance with it. To embody it.

More than thinking about paradox, that is what I want. I want to hear the stories and sing the songs of this season, maybe for the millionth time, and follow where they lead. Where Advent, and all her beautiful, truthful, and mysterious paradoxes, comes alive. Where we do too. May it be so. Amen.