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Advent 1C
Peace, Seattle
December 2, 2018
Luke 21:25-36

A COMMUNITY FOR THE LONG HAUL

As December begins, we find ourselves facing familiar circumstances.

- To-do lists are growing.
- End of semester assignments and year-end projects are looming.
- We juggle to get doctor and dentist appointments in before deductibles reset on January 1.
- This and all the other pressures that come with the territory of Christmas. You know the drill…

While on a larger scale…

- Unresolved conflicts still dog our world.
- Financial markets, like the ground in Anchorage last week, shake and rattle.
- The political climate grows ever more unpredictable.
- Environmental crises—like sea levels—are on the rise.

All this during the time of the year when light diminishes and cold sets in.
The upshot: our world is in just as much trouble now in December as it was back in January.

As if that isn't depressing enough, in a recent report, The Center for Disease Control says life expectancy—which you'd think would be going UP in a wealthy country like ours—is actually going DOWN…and not for the first time but for the third year in a row.

It's the longest sustained decline since a four-year period in the last century—a period that included World War I and a global Spanish flu pandemic.[1]

Driving that downward trend are the rising numbers of deaths from suicide and the opioid epidemic. But what's driving those causes?

In a column in yesterday's Seattle Times, Daniel Low, a medicine resident at Swedish Hospital, called it "an epidemic of loneliness."[2]

> "I…[engage] with people from all walks of life [and] with all sorts of medical conditions," he writes. "But what I see more than anything is loneliness. There are patients who can't pursue necessary surgeries because they have no one to drive them to or from the hospital while under anesthesia; [and] patients who come to clinic weekly because conversing with the medical team represents their best opportunity to interact with people; and [still] countless more whom we never see because their isolation is so debilitating they are unable to leave the homes."[3]

There are many complex variables related to the inordinate rise in opioid and suicidal deaths we're experiencing in this country, but social isolation and loneliness play a key role.

"Loneliness," says Dr. Low "threatens the futures of more people in our country than virtually any other illness."

[1] https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/hus/contents2017.htm?search=Life_expectancy
[2] *The Seattle Times*, page A9, December 1, 2018.
[3] Ibid.

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On this first Sunday of Advent we begin a new church year—the Year of Luke.
Tradition tells us the author of this gospel was a physician, which makes complete sense when you see how central healing and community-building are to Luke's portrait of Jesus.

In Luke's story of Jesus, we see time and again how SALVATION is more than a theological concept—it's a web of interlocking realities—physical healing, forgiveness, safety, wholeness and community. Spiritual, physical, mental and emotional health are inseparably intertwined in Luke's gospel.

Jesus, who is God in the flesh, strives to bring wholeness to all these aspects of our lives and world. And his primary method for doing so is through building diverse communities of men and women who connect with God and each other in faith and service.

For some of us, it may be easy to take this gathering we're part of each week for granted.

What I mean is, if like me you grew up in the church and a weekly community gathering like this was simply part of your life, you get used to walking into a room where there's a smile waiting and other people know your name; you get used to bringing your children into a gathering where they have playmates and surrogate grandparents and their less than perfect behaviors are tolerated; you get used to folks using their energies and talents to make something meaningful, beautiful, or scrumptious.

The truth is this kind of community is becoming more and more rare—and yet it's what people are longing for; an antidote to the loneliness and cynicism and despair that has a grip on an increasing percentage of our neighbors.

There's something powerful about being in a group of folks where you don't have to be perfect because no one else is either; where there's clarity about what matters most; where you can practice the art of forgiving and being forgiven; where you can give yourself to something for the long haul.

Many people have come and gone from this community called Peace over the past 74 years, but there's a certain quality—a vibrant welcome, an openness to others, a commitment to service—seeded by the Holy Spirit—that makes this congregation work at the core.

And who wouldn't want that?

We'll be launching a new phase of our 75th Anniversary year soon—a reinvigorated capital campaign—that will help us complete our long term goal of refreshing and updating our building so that the image we present to folks on the OUTSIDE matches the vibrant community we experience on the INSIDE.

While this effort, with your help, will bring welcome and needed changes, the deeper challenge we face as a congregation is not making ourselves more attractive, but finding more ways to reach beyond our doors and engage the lonely, isolated, community-starved people Dr. Low writes about—who are longing to be noticed, to be seen, to be known and to be loved.

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The Gospel readings we hear this Advent are full of paradox.[4]

- The "signs" Luke speaks of today in the 21st chapter are paired with the "sign" that is the infant Jesus himself.
- The power and glory accompanying Christ's return are pared with the helplessness and humility of his birth. Warnings of distress and anxiety are set alongside the message of "good news of great joy for all the people."

The infant Jesus we will meet is more than a baby in a manger—he's a Savior, the Messiah of God. And this Savior will end up teaching: "Whoever seeks to preserve her life will lose it, but whoever loses her life will keep it." Paradox.

The gospel message isn't so much about either/or as it is about both/and. And we hold the tension, the paradox of that truth together—as we hold the tensions and paradoxes of our lives together—even as we await the fullness of God's reign which is both NOW and NOT YET.

The season of Advent is a season of waiting. But as Henry Nouwen writes:

> [Our] waiting…is not an empty waiting… We wait…in the conviction that we have already seen God's footsteps… As we wait, we remember him for whom we are waiting, and as we remember him we create a community ready to welcome him when he comes.[5]

HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY, Jesus promises, BUT MY WORDS WILL NOT PASS AWAY.

The surest sign of this truth this morning is not a cosmic sign, but this community itself; gathered around font and table, coming together to ingest Christ's promise in bread and wine, and to support one another as we make our way together on this venture called life.

LET US PRAY:
Almighty and Altender God, our source and our goal, to you belongs all our beginnings and all our endings. So, shape our lives this day with hope. Nourish our community with your body and blood of your son, that we might in turn stand with and for one another and for our neighbors, testifying with our lives to the hope that is in us, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

[4] My thanks to Michal Beth Dinkler, Working Preacher, for these pairings. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3892
[5] *Bread for the Journey*