**The Rev. Thomas M. Murphy**

**St. Thomas’ Episcopal Church, Owings Mills MD**

**November 27, 2022**

**Year A: The First Sunday of Advent**

**Isaiah 2:1-5**

**Psalm 122**

**Romans 13:1—14**

**Matthew 24:36-44**

**“Come, Let Us Walk in the Light of the Lord!”**

You may remember that about a month ago I spent a week on a silent retreat at a monastery in Kentucky, a place called the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Parishioners have reacted to this piece of news in different ways.

Some people like the idea. Some have even been a little envious, saying something like “Oh that sounds like heaven. I wish I could get away for a few days of peace and quiet.”

Others shake their heads – nope, nope - and say something like, “There’s no way I could stay quiet for that long.”

And others have looked at me kind of skeptically and asked what exactly did you do with all that quiet time?

Well, in case you’re wondering, I prayed a lot – both on my own and in church with the monks and the other guests – and I did a lot of reading. I got to bed earlier than usual. And, fortunately, since the weather was beautiful, I walked a lot on long and meandering trails throughout the abbey’s vast grounds.

Almost everything I saw on those walks was so beautiful – the fall foliage glowing orange and gold, birds fluttering away as I approached, the occasional cross or religious statue.

But these walks were a little unsettling, too.

The abbey is pretty remote so I often didn’t have cellphone service, and I almost never saw anyone else on the trails.

As I walked, it crossed my mind that I didn’t know any of the other guests, and nobody took attendance at meals, and nobody would check that I was back in my room at night.

Along the way, I did have to step around evidence left behind by wild animals – just what kind of wild animals, I wasn’t sure. And, maybe because as a kid I watched too many Saturday morning cartoons, I can never remember what you’re supposed to do when you encounter a bear – is it run, stand still, play dead, or take off in a zigzag?

It dawned on me that I was about as alone as I’ve ever been, and that if something happened to middle-aged me, it might be a while before anyone knew about it and was able to get me help.

Well, obviously, everything turned out just fine but those long walks were a reminder of what’s always true as we journey through of life.

So much of our journey is beautiful but along the way there is always danger and often there is much suffering.

Of course, you don’t have to spend a silent week at a monastery to be reminded about that!

Recently we’ve had some terrible reminders of the world’s brokenness and just how much suffering there is all around us.

Our parish has some strong and deep connections with the University of Virginia, so many of us were especially shocked and heartbroken a couple of weeks ago when a UVA student senselessly shot three of his fellow students, talented athletes with bright smiles and brighter futures, young men who loved and were loved.

And last week, yet another messed up, angry, armed-to-the-teeth man, who had probably been fed a rotten diet of ignorance, fear, and hate, walked into Club Q, a bar and nightclub that had been seen as one of the few safe places in Colorado Springs for LGBTQ people and their friends. This man opened fire, killing five people, people who worked there and people who were there just to relax and enjoy themselves - to be themselves.

And not long after that, the close-knit night shift workers at the Walmart in Chesapeake, Virginia, was shattered when one of their own turned violent, killing six of his coworkers before taking his own life.

And we can’t lose sight of the relentless violence and suffering in the city just down the road from us, enduring yet another year with more than 300 homicides.

So much suffering.

And, in a way, even our Thanksgiving meal bags are a reminder of suffering.

It is simply amazing to me that we donated 180 bags, heavy bags filled to the brim with food and fixings and treats! Last Monday a small group of parishioners loaded all those heavy bags into their cars and trucks and brought them over to the Community Crisis Center.

Here’s the thing, though: by the end of the day, all but 10 of those bags had been distributed to hungry people – a sobering reminder of the great need that’s all around us.

Much of our journey is beautiful but there is always danger, and often there is much suffering.

And we have a hard time seeing our destination.

As Gethsemani’s most famous monk, Thomas Merton once wrote,

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end.”

Today is all about beginnings and endings.

It’s the start of a new church year, the First Sunday of Advent.

And during these four quick Advent Sundays, we prepare for the birth of Jesus, born far from home and in the humblest of circumstances.

And we also look ahead to the end of time – ahead to our ultimate destination – ahead to the day of judgment.

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus reminds us that we do not know when we will reach our destination. He warns us that it will be sudden and unexpected – even Jesus doesn’t know the exact date and time! So we’d better pay attention and be prepared.

Although the schedule is a mystery, the Prophet Isaiah does give us some idea of where we are headed.

In today’s first lesson, Isaiah offers a powerful vision, foreseeing a time and place when and where God will draw all the peoples of the world to God’s holy mountain.

There, we will learn together.

There, we will walk beside one another.

There, God will be our judge.

There, we will bend our tools of death into tools of new life.

There, we will set aside hate.

And Isaiah concludes by extending a most beautiful invitation:

“Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

Since I keep talking about it, you can probably tell that I really enjoyed my silent retreat. And, although I was mindful that things could go wrong, I loved my long walks up and down the hills.

I’m grateful to have had that time away but, you know, as good as it was, it really can’t compare with walking beside you, here, week after week.

Because it’s here that we walk in the light of the Lord – together - checking on one another, rushing to help when one of us is in trouble.

It’s here that we walk in the light of the Lord – together - giving away a small mountain of food for Thanksgiving, welcoming guests from faraway lands, singing our hearts out, guiding young acolytes into their new ministry, opening our doors to absolutely everybody, studying God’s Word together, caring for this old holy place, placing Christmas wreaths throughout the churchyard, honoring the dead who in most cases have no one alive to remember them.

It’s right here that we walk in the light of the Lord – together - listening for God’s call, wondering what more we can do to serve God and our neighbors.

Much of our journey is beautiful but there is always danger, and, often there is much suffering.

And we have a hard time seeing our destination.

Considering our many troubles, maybe Isaiah’s vision seems like a fantasy, impossibly far beyond our reach.

But, you know, on especially clear days – like when I’m over at Gilead House with Hizbullah and Abdul and friends new and old - on clear days like last Sunday evening when we celebrated the Last Chance Mass literally surrounded by all those bags of food - on especially clear days, I can look down the trail and, if I squint a little, I can almost see God’s holy mountain, where we will all finally live in peace, where we will all have enough, living the life that God has always meant for us.

A new year has begun.

“Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

Amen.