

“Heads Up!”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
December 1, 2024 - First Sunday of Advent

[Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36](#)

Happy New Year! We start a new church year today with this first Sunday of the Advent season, even as our other calendars tell us that still have another month to go before reaching the new year. And so we've arrived at an in-between time, when our church and cultural calendars do not match up and we are out of synch. Culturally, as Thanksgiving and Black Friday are now behind us, and we begin the month of December, we have already shifted holiday gears and are celebrating Christmastime, buying presents and sending out cards; putting up trees and lights; enjoying eggnog and fruitcakes; watching *Elf* and the many cinematic renditions of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*; and singing along to Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" as well as a host of traditional Christmas carols. But while our culture has already moved into the Christmas season, it is good for those of us who follow the liturgical calendar in our worship of Christ to recognize that we're not there yet as we have four Sundays of Advent first, and Advent is a good and important season that should not simply be ignored or erased by our broader cultural trends. And so our journeys have led us here today as we gather on this first Sunday of Advent, and we pay attention to the important themes of this season that prepare us for the coming celebration of the birth of Christ.

We consider on the Sundays of Advent the needy state of the world and our own lives. We listen to the voices of the prophets as they call us to see clearly how the world we live in is far from the world God envisions for us, how we have not lived together in ways that allow all people to enjoy justice and peace, and as they also call us to also see that the darkness that seems so prevalent and overwhelming is being displaced as God kindles anew flames of hope, love, joy, and peace in our hearts and that a good day will come when all the world will be filled with God's light and we will dwell together enjoying justice and peace.

So Advent is a season for us to pay attention to where we are and where God wants us to be. We do not simply close our eyes to the real needs of the world as

we merrily sing our fa-la-las, obliviously stick our heads in the sand, or turn our brains off with mind-numbing substances or mind-distracting devices. Rather, we are reminded that we are to keep our heads up and, as my high school football coach used to tell us often, keep our heads on a swivel, being alert to all that is happening around us. For it is when we are awake and alert and aware that we can more clearly see where darkness is operative and where God's lights of hope, love, joy, and peace need to shine.

Carrying that light where it is needed is our job. As followers of Christ, who was born as God's Light and showed us how to live as bearers of God's light, we have taken on this job. Being bearers of light in darkened places is an essential aspect of the shared identity we are given through our baptisms, and it is an aspect of our identity that we are reminded of each time we gather to receive communion, when we take in Christ's body that we would better remember to be Christ's body now, actively carrying on his light-shining work in this world.

So, this Advent, let us welcome in more of God's light in our lives. Let us pay attention to that light; let us pay attention also to where more of God's light is needed in our homes, in our neighborhoods, throughout this nation, and around the world. Let us each offer a new church year resolution to carry God's light into the darkened places where we see that it is needed and to shine it brightly in those places. May this be the gift that we bear and bring to the humble manger as we begin our journey there now along with the Christ-bearing Mary and faith-bearing Joseph, the song-bearing angels, the awe-bearing shepherds, and the treasure-bearing magi. As we gather at the manger this Christmas, bearing the light of God's hope, joy, peace, and love, may we be inspired anew by the story of God's giving of the perfect gift of Light, and may we go out renewed in our commitment to grow Christ's realm of light in the world. Amen.