

*A Sermon preached by The Reverend Deborah Phillips
At Grace Church Salem*

Advent III Year C The Beginning is Near

The last few weeks, there has been much talk about endings.

Mary Linda told me about a program she watched on either the Discovery or History Channel which talked about the end of the Mayan calendar predicting the end of the world.

She then remarked how the readings in church seemed to speak about these same signs.

We hear talk of the fiscal cliff and the end of stable economies.

The days are getting darker, there is little less light each day.

And then, this weekend, this terrible atrocity in Newtown, Ct., this killing of the innocents certainly makes it seem as if the end is very near.

I was looking at some postings on Facebook the other day.

I came upon this wonderful picture.

In it is a clean cut young man with white shirt and tie, and horned rimmed glasses.

He is carrying a sign that reads, "The beginning is near."

The beginning is near.

How very Advent!

The beginning is near, the best is yet to come.

During this season, get ready for a new beginning.

And not just to relive the Nativity Story.

And, not just to prepare for the in-breaking of the kingdom of the future.

No; get ready for the newness of God here on earth today.

For Christ came into this world not just to lead us to the next, but to give this world a new start, a redeemed start in the present as well as the future.

The beginning is near.

As people, we are given a choice to view the world as ending or beginning.

If you elect to see the end as being near, the world slowly grows dark.

There is a finality to most things, life draws in around you.

You can become fearful and anxious.

In some cases, you want to make your final mark on the world, regardless of the impact.

You live each day as if it was the last so you don't have to live with the consequences.

As Christians, we elect to see the **beginning** as being near.

The dawn breaks for us and we are flooded with light.

I asked the Choir School the other day why they think we use purple for Advent.

One of the choristers suggested that maybe it's because that is the color of the sky when the dawn breaks and Advent is the dawn of a new year.

Ariel is definitely a "beginning is near" kind of girl.

As Christians, we approach each day from a new perspective.

We strive to leave the burdens from the past behind so they do not hinder us in the future.

We attempt to start fresh with relationships that may have grown stale, to reach out to those with whom we've lost touch.

We, as Christians, are open to new opportunities.

We are fearless and confident.

We live each day as if it was our first, our birth day, and approach it with joy and expectation.

Many of us have come to church today to get some answers as to the shootings on Friday.

We come here because here there are others with our beliefs and questions.

We come here because we feel safe asking these questions and even getting angry.

The Church cannot give us all the answers we are looking for.
But, this I believe.
God is grieving today.
God is grieving for all the tragedy in the world each day.
God is also present with each of us in this grief, in this horror.
God is wrapping us in sacred love.
God weeps for those who believe the end is near.

For when we get to a place where we lose hope, when we believe that the end is near, we go to a very dark and dangerous place.
When we get there, to that vulnerable place, the Evil One swoops in.
For those whose world view is “the end is near” have a tendency to become despondent and depressed and a kind of spiritual dying overcomes them.
That is when the most innocent in our society are threatened.
That is when the most vulnerable are in danger.
People of the darkness will not tolerate those who walk in the light.
And no one is more filled with the light than a young child.

What then shall we do?
This is the question asked in our Gospel.
This is the question on our hearts.
What then shall we do?

We must begin to be more intentional about living lives which expect the beginning is near.
This means building a society filled with hope for the future; that prepares for the future, rather than simply trying to get the most out of whatever we can today.
It means offering hope to others, through service, care, and education.
It means eliminating access to the weapons of the Evil One and extending access to the care necessary for good mental and spiritual health.
It means finding ways for every human being to look forward to the future with joy.

John calls us to discern the common good, to consume only what is needed, to distribute according to need and to prepare for the One who is the beginning.
Rejoice in the Lord, let go of unnecessary things so that we start new with God.
Do not worry about anything, for God never leaves us.
Turn to him with all our heart, mind and soul.
Let the Holy Spirit through the living waters of baptism stir us up, stir up our hearts, so that we may rejoice in the nearness of God.
This day is this day.
Let us live it in joyful expectation of the future, while we do our part to build up a reasonable and hopeful society.
Most importantly, never ever forget, that as a result of the Resurrection, no day will ever be our last.

Let us pray:
Sustaining and redeeming God,
New every morning is your love, new mercies each returning day: Grant us grace to live each day as our first, to serve those in need, to lead those out of the darkness, to work for a safe and healthy society and to give thanks and praise to you for your constant presence, while we await the beginning, which is very near. Amen.