Blessed Advent.  Blessed Coming.

Advent is a semi-penitential season. It is much less penitent than Lent, but there is still a flavor of preparing our hearts for the coming of Christ in the undefended newborn of the manger.  Still, most of us get caught up in the business of getting “ready” for our Christmas holiday. Back in the day, however, it was harder to ignore Advent. In fact, Advent was more like Lent and lasted also about 6 weeks. The readings for this Sunday then were at almost the half way point for Advent. You can sense a  natural turn in the readings, or almost a natural friction between the Old and New Testament readings. They read somewhat similar, but then again they do rub up against each other.

The reading from Isaiah and the psalm appointed for the day, both have an almost angry intimacy with God. There is a flavor of having been let down; there is an anger at God for being fed with the bread of tears. In Isaiah, there is even an accusation that people have gone astray because God has been unavailable.  Make no mistake, there are real times when people can feel terribly let down by God—past, present or future. It can be little things in an individual’s life or it can be big things like the Babylonian exile, war or the Holocaust.

The turn in the Epistle, the first letter to the Corinthians, reflects an ever present already and not yet. Christ has come, and in our church liturgical calendar Christ is coming.  We have Paul’s thanksgiving for the people of Corinth.  In so many ways they are just like we are.  Most Christians in the pew know 1 Corinthians for the passage read often at weddings or on plaques “Love is patient and kind..”,  But honestly, when one reads the whole letter, you have to wonder why Paul gives thanks for them.  They are doing all kinds of awful, and most of Paul’s letter is a strong rebuke of their behavior.  Still Paul is thankful that they have heard of Jesus and Jesus is now busy acting in their hearts. So there is this thankfulness for the people of Corinth letting in the good news, the Gospel.  This makes all the difference, and even as we head towards Advent, we are already changed because we have let in the Good news to work, to percolate, to change us little by little.

And so it is that when we have missed the mark or feel that God has let us down, we are still changed by the coming of Jesus.  This change is expressed exquisitely by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, writing in a Nazi concentration camp in 1944. He wrote, “God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross.  He is weak and powerless in the world, and this is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.” Bonhoeffer discovered that the hiddenness of God is a reflection of the divine character of God. God relates to us through the vulnerable path of unconditional, non-coercive love and suffering rather than domination and force.  To know this in our bones, is what God asks of us. Jesus tells us to be Keep awake,   or you could think of it in today’s slang, to be “woke.” Be woke to see God working in the world, be woke to see the in-breaking of Christ

And we wait and we wait, we wait for a second coming and we wait liturgically for a baby entering our world. We relive the messianic expectation, and rejoicing in the spirit that it happened already and still continues to happen, breaking into our world, changing us, which then changes the world.  Wake up world. be WOKE. Christ is coming.