

Message: “Faith in Uncertain Times”

“Take a gun and end it all, Sheryl,” said a dark, mocking voice in her mind. **“End it and all this pain and worry will be over.”**¹ She was in the middle of her nightly routine when the strange thought popped into her head. Now she just sat on her bed, staring at the wall. It felt like a weight was pressing down on her.

All of a sudden, something else popped in Sheryl’s mind.

Not a thought, exactly, but an image. An imposing, rectangular shape: a billboard. It pushed the other thoughts aside until it was all she could visualize. It was faded from months in the sun, but legible, just like any other sign on the freeway. But this one was different. In simple letters, it had a phone number for a prayer request line.

“Wait a second. I know that sign!” Sheryl saw the billboard hundreds of times on her daily drive. She’d never given it more than a glance. But now it was all Sheryl could see in her mind. A prayer line? She’d never been one to pray for things. She’d certainly never called a prayer line. Who did that?

But Sheryl had to do something. She was in her mid-twenties and had dissolved her one-year marriage. Sheryl’s husband was abusive, emotionally and physically. She’d finally reached her breaking point when he came at her with a large kitchen knife. Sheryl fled the house with nothing but a bag of clothes. Ever since, she’d been staying with her mother in her old bedroom, complete with nightlight.

Sheryl was working hard to get her life on track. She went back to school, studying nursing. The problem was school was a long drive from her mom’s house. Sheryl had to leave at 5 am to make class at 7 am. Not only was the course work difficult, but the time she wasn’t studying or in class was spent in the car. There was plenty of time for her worries and doubts to pound away at her.

Through it all, Sheryl tried to maintain a positive outlook. But it felt like life was knocking her down again and again and, each time, it was

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/miracles/gods-grace/the-mysterious-voice-that-helped-her-believe-in-prayer>

harder to get back up. The stakes were high. Anxiety was setting in, and the possibility of failure was real - all embodied by the horrible voice.

Could a billboard prayer line really be the answer? It seemed silly, but something about the mental image compelled Sheryl. She dialed. A woman picked up after one ring. "Hello?" She sounded nice, but Sheryl didn't know what to say. "Hello?"

"I need help," Sheryl blurted out. "Can you pray for me?"

"Of course," the woman said. "What's your name, dear?" "Sheryl."

"You'll be in our prayers, Sheryl. We're having a lock-in tonight."

"A what?" Sheryl asked. "A group of us are staying in the church all night, praying" the woman said. "We won't leave until morning." They talked for a bit.

Sheryl thanked her before she hung up. People praying for her all night? Weird, she thought. But what did she have to lose?

Sheryl fell asleep, only to wake up suddenly to a feeling. There it was again, as if someone had gently touched the bottom of her foot.

Sheryl sat up in bed. The room was empty, except for the nightlight's dim glow. But there was a presence, faint at first but growing stronger. From the point where she felt the touch, warmth blossomed. Sheryl says, *"It traveled from my foot, up my leg, then spread throughout my body, like water slowly filling me or surrounding me; bathing me from my feet to the top of my head."*

What's going on? That was when the light in the room changed. It became brilliant, nearly blinding. Sheryl was terrified.

"Don't be afraid," the light said, "Everything here means nothing." Though the words hadn't been spoken aloud, still she understood them. ...suddenly the light seemed to melt away. It was like a dream.

But the words remained. Sheryl mulled over the phrase the next morning during her drive. The stress brought on by schoolwork, financial problems, the pain of a disastrous marriage and separation, the fear she had of the future ... did it mean nothing?

Sheryl suddenly remembered the people praying all night. She realized she didn't receive a message of despair, but a message of hope.

Don't be afraid. Sheryl's worries and fears didn't stop right away. There were days when she thought she'd never graduate or move on. But whenever Sheryl passed the highway sign, she smiled. It was a reminder there were people out there; people who cared.

Ever since Sheryl made the phone call, she's started to pray.

There are always answers. Maybe not as obvious as a billboard or a light appearing in your bedroom, but they're there.

Sheryl had a miraculous, spiritual encounter. She received a message in a mysterious way. It was just the message she needed to hear. People receive messages from God. If you ask, you'll hear those stories. There are people here who have had similar experiences.

I believe Sheryl's message is a good illustration for us today.

It brings the season of Advent, the scripture readings and our lives together. Let me offer a few illustrations.

Let's start with our lives. I know there are people in this room, family members or friends who are living Sheryl's story. Bad relationships, financial problems, difficulties at school, unfulfilling work, feeling like you're a failure, anxiety, depression ... the list goes on. And that's just our personal lives.

When you add on the issues we're facing around the world – immigration, climate change, politics, racism, sexual identity, abuse, human trafficking, **we're all feeling like there's a weight pressing down on us.** Some of us may find ourselves caught in a spiral of negative thoughts, isolated and alone, with no one to talk to. There are days when we just want to stay in bed. But more sleep isn't the answer.

What we need is a healthier life, spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. How do we find that life? Isaiah offers a clue, "*Come, let's go ... to the house of ... God so that God may teach us the ways and we may walk in God's paths*" (2:3). The first step toward a healthier life is to have a spiritual life. That means we're willing to believe in a higher power, something beyond us. That's a healthier way to live.

When we trust in God, we find ourselves in a more positive frame.

We find out we're connected in ways we didn't realize. There is an end to the worries, frustrations and anxieties of life. We find meaning and purpose to life. Death isn't the answer, life is. We're better able to cope with illness, loss and failure. There's light in the darkness.

We are reminded there's spiritual light in the darkness of life.

That's what we remember when the first candle is lit on the Advent wreath. The light is small at first, but it grows as we prepare ourselves each week to receive all Jesus gives us: the gift of love and peace.

The gift of Christ is available to us every day, not just during Advent and Christmas. We can celebrate Christmas every day in our hearts if we want to. Wouldn't that be amazing? The reality is that few, if any of us, can do so. The hurts of yesterday, the problems of today and the worries of tomorrow can seem insurmountable.

Jesus knows what we're facing. As the Son of God, he saw things others didn't. Our scripture from Matthew 24:36-44 is an example. Jesus is teaching us how to live. The problem is that Jesus' lesson is lost in the worries the disciples were hearing.

Let me give you a little background. A day earlier, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a colt to shouts of "*Hosannah*," palm branches waving, and a cheering crowd. Jesus travels back and forth between the Temple and the Mount of Olives, teaching in the outer courts every day.

Today, he cries when he sees the Temple. The disciples are concerned. When they ask why Jesus is sad, he tells them they won't see him until he returns and the temple will fall, everything will be demolished (Matthew 23:39; 24:2).

Astonished, the disciples privately ask two questions, "When will this happen?" and "What are the signs of your coming?" (24:3).

The word for "coming" is advent. It also means "be present", "arrival" or "entering into a situation." Jesus enters into the situations of our lives. The disciples know Jesus is sharing something big with them. They don't understand how big, but it will mean changes for their lives and the lives of all the people. They don't know Jesus will die and be resurrected in a few days like we do when we read these words.

An amazing day is coming when we'll all be joined with Jesus and our loved ones in heaven. No one knows when that day will come. Jesus will return in full glory to usher in a new age of heaven on earth. That's a promise we hold on to.

Christmas is the reminder of Jesus' first coming. Advent is the reminder of Jesus' second coming. It doesn't matter if there are wars or threats of war. It doesn't matter if there are those who abuse Jesus' name for personal profit. It doesn't matter if others fall away or betray us.

What matters is holding onto our faith in Jesus every single day. That's what it means when Jesus says, *"As it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Human One. In those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark. They didn't know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. The coming of the Human One will be like that"* (vv37-39).

It took Noah more than ten years to build the ark. What did he and all of the people do during that time of preparation? They lived ordinary lives. They ate and drank, they married and had children; they lived life.

What makes a difference is how they lived. Following the ways of the Lord doesn't mean living in fear. It's the opposite. Jesus doesn't use our fears to get us to follow. Jesus loves us and shows us that no defeat or victory matters. We won't be overwhelmed when we hold onto him. All that matters is the final victory we have in Christ.

There's a paradox: we must take the evil we encounter seriously, but we must take our destiny to be with Jesus in heaven just as seriously.

How do we do that? Endurance. Endurance is the way of life. God's kingdom endures. Waiting is made possible because hope is made real. That hope is the coming of Jesus.

Jesus prepares us for the long haul. We have to learn to wait and be patient. We can endure and, by so doing, we will prevail. We will seek peace with justice. Like Noah or a good scout, we can "be prepared." We can continue to live our lives and do our work. We don't need to worry or become "hyper-aware."

I encourage you to live each day as if it was your last. I love the image evoked by the saying “dance as though no one is watching.” Let’s change it a bit.

Let’s “live like God is watching with love.”

Let us pray ...

Isaiah 2:1-5 (CEB)

This is what Isaiah, Amoz’s son, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
In the days to come

the mountain of the LORD’s house
will be the highest of the mountains.

It will be lifted above the hills; peoples will stream to it.

Many nations will go and say,

“Come, let’s go up to the LORD’s mountain,
to the house of Jacob’s God
so that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in God’s paths.”

Instruction will come from Zion; the LORD’s word from Jerusalem.

God will judge between the nations,
and settle disputes of mighty nations.

Then they will beat their swords into iron plows
and their spears into pruning tools.

Nation will not take up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn how to make war.

Come, house of Jacob, let’s walk by the LORD’s light.

Matthew 24:36-44 (CEB)

“But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows. As it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Human One. In those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark. They didn’t know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. The coming of the Human One will be like that. At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and the other left. Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know what day the Lord is coming. But you understand that if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert and wouldn’t allow the thief to break into his house. Therefore, you also should be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don’t know.”