My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our grateful hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

As we open another season of Advent, I’d like to say one thing: the lectionary was not created to match up with our Advent candles. But it’s also important for us to be able to focus on God’s arrival in our lives through the lenses of love, hope, joy, and peace. So I’m going to try and help us understand that the journey to Jerusalem is a metaphor for well-being, peace and nearness to God, and that starts with defining where we’re at while on that journey. We live between creation and re-creation, looking backward at God to see what God has done, looking forward at where God might be pointing us for further purpose, but most of all we live right here, right now. We are assured of God’s presence in the current moment, and where God is present, there is love.

All that said, maybe the texts match up with the Advent calendar after all, on this Advent Sunday of Love.

This Sunday is also about definitions for our Advent journey, those things that we need to set up front in order to understand what follows. So I’d like to start out with understanding that watchfulness and wakefulness in this context is the call to righteousness with God. The point of being awake is that we can now live accordingly into God’s promises fulfilled, not trying to figure out when the time is coming or in utter fear and despair.

Not even Jesus, the Messiah, knows when these end times of re-creation of the world will happen, and I think that’s a key point. God has not revealed all to Jesus; there’s things Jesus has to learn and discover, too, beyond just learning carpentry and local geography. Being caught off-guard is an important part of life. We spend billions, of course, trying to NOT be caught off guard on nations spying on each other, predicting the next big weather system which will create havoc, and figuring out how we can prevent disease and pestilence from spreading. But I think we invoke God into our lives to help us not fear the future, and we can then go about things living in promise and not anxiety. A hug makes us less fearful, right? God’s hugging us with this text.

We should also take note of Isaiah’s accusal of the people as a whole. Jerusalem is wedged between Assyria and Egypt, but that’s a position that happens because the people have become dishonest and corrupt. In that day, the people have become irresponsible and oppressive toward the people, with the leaders bathing in riches and luxury rather than understanding God’s mandates for mercy, justice, and compassion. For Isaiah, there is always this tension between redemption and judgment. There’s no real end of time or beyond time to prophecy as it’s spoken, but a transformation of the here and now.

We are introduced to the promises of God in the midst of despair. It’s one of the reasons why Isaiah is the most quoted book of the Bible. Isaiah’s vision is one of imagination that looks beyond present dismay through the eyes of God. God eyes are the eyes of love, those eyes which see what is not yet; that’s the function of Advent and the life of faith. Faith sees what will be; that which is not yet realized. Sometimes that contrast is so radical as to be unbelievable, lions and lambs, spears and ploughshares. For Isaiah, wherever religion concerns itself with the problems of society, and present social realities are taken as inadequate, that’s where courage is maintained to continue in the effort to redeem society of injustice. That ideal of history in the future is the love we are talking about even in the midst of great devastation and despair.

Our world today doesn’t seem all that much different from that of Isaiah. Nations still seek an advantage over one another at any and all cost and divert their billions to war and domination. Our world today is not all that different from Jesus, when prophets who exhort us to better relations between each other are briefly in our lives and gaining traction before they are killed before we can see all they might do. Justice and peace come from God’s love for his chosen people; when the nations learn the Torah, war is no longer the arbiter of human will. God’s justice prevails, they justice of Hesed, or kindness between the peoples. There’s no need for national interest or triumphalism, or the toxicity of religious nationalism which invokes God on every side of conflict these days. Russia is blessed in its aggression; Ukraine is blessed in its defense. But we know that *whatever* side America takes God stands with us, right?

We too often talk about the journey of faith without adequately describing what the destination looks like. God’s vision is universal; no one political or economic ideology prevails. War does not lead to peace. Division does not lead to peace. Only relying on God’s love forgiveness and grace leads to peace. But let’s walk into this vision, not just sit and wait for it to come true.

Is this good or bad news? I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

In Charles Dickens’ famous story “A Christmas Carol,” the future is never set, but always coming in the life of Ebeneezer Scrooge. There is yet time to change, but it depends on us taking an awfully hard look at our past and present to understand that we have not adequately loved. We’re left to prepare for the future in the here and now present times, and lighting Advent candles in the midst of growing darkness is our way as Christians.

Knowing that light will overcome the darkness is our discipleship. We don’t know how bright that light is or where it will lead. It may get pretty dark. But we know that God’s love, and the light of a single candle can hold it off for a while. And that glimmer reminds us that we were created for more than fear because Jesus, the Son of Man and the Son of God whose birth is coming, has promised to come always to be with us and for us.

We are defining our journey, not our endpoint, with the light of a pilgrimage. One which will require not just the invitation to receive Christ, but to go there, too. God’s love not only invites, but insists that in this time and place, our participation is required. The choice is always ours whether we will.

Thanks be to God, Amen.