

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today is the third Sunday of Advent and we gather days before Thanksgiving. Some of us are excited for the week ahead. Some are dreading difficult conversations at the table. Some are grieving someone who will not be there this year. Some are tired from the news, the world, or the long list of things to do. And Advent meets us right here—in real life, in real complexity, and in real longing.

Advent is not passive waiting. It is active hope. It is participating in what God is already doing, anticipating the world God is bringing about, leaning toward God's reign of justice and mercy even when we cannot yet see it fully. And with that in mind, it might feel strange that today's gospel drops us right into the crucifixion. It doesn't feel very "Advent-y." But maybe it's exactly right. Because this story reveals the deepest truth of what we anticipate in Advent: namely, a God who stands in solidarity with the vulnerable, a God who refuses to answer cruelty with cruelty, a God who will not abandon love no matter the cost.

In Luke's gospel, we heard that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. The scene was full of escalating harm: the leaders scoffed, the soldiers mocked, one criminal derided him, and the crowd watched. The world heaped humiliation and pain on him. This is what the end of the world looked like for Jesus. And in a hundred different ways, we know what that feels like.

Many of us know what it's like to be wronged, to be misunderstood, to be judged unfairly. We know the sting of a harsh word at the Thanksgiving table.

We know the tension at work when a coworker takes credit for our labor or publicly blames us. We know what it's like when a client lashes out, or a friend disappoints, or a partner breaks our trust. We know what it feels like when systems fail us—when families are torn apart by ICE raids, when asylum seekers hit wall after wall, when the safety nets we depend on are disrupted. And when we're hurt or humiliated or afraid, our instinct is almost always the same— we want to defend ourselves. Lunge back. Fire off the angry email. Retaliate.

And we see that tension in the two criminals on the cross. One wanted to escape right away saying, "Save yourself and us!" The other wanted reassurance later saying, "Remember me." Both were trying to make sense of suffering. Both were reaching for salvation. And yet neither fully understood the mercy unfolding beside them.

Then, from the cross, Jesus spoke the words that continue to undo us, saying "Father, forgive them." We know that these exact words don't appear in the earliest manuscripts, but they ring true to everything Jesus lived and taught. He didn't wait for an apology. He didn't wait for changed behavior. He chose compassion in the middle of violence. He refused to let the cruelty around him determine who he will be. He stood with humanity—not in sentimentality, but in embodying a costly solidarity.

Now, I want to be clear in saying that you and I, we, are not Jesus. We are not commanded to forgive instantly or perfectly. We are not asked to endure harm without boundaries. But Jesus opened a new possibility for us. He revealed a path that is not governed by fear or retaliation. And Advent invites us to take even a small step down that path.

One such example was back in 1992, in an Amish community in Belleville, Pennsylvania. One night, someone set fire to a series of barns —six barns destroyed, livestock lost, equipment ruined, families devastated. It was an enormous blow to a people whose lives depend on the land on the eve of planting season. While police opened investigations and reporters asked questions, the Amish community responded in a different way. Neighbors arrived by the dozens—by buggy, on foot, with tools in hand. They shoveled debris, cleared rubble, raised new barns. They did not wait to know who was responsible before they put their hands to rebuilding. They did not allow vengeance or bitterness to define them. They chose solidarity over retaliation. They let their hope—not their hurt—shape their next step.

That kind of response is not naïve. It is not soft. It is courageous. It is a witness to a different kind of world. And it echoes what Jesus showed on the cross: that dignity can be chosen even when dignity is denied, that compassion can be offered even in suffering, and that solidarity can interrupt the cycle of harm.

This is a reminder of exactly why today's crucifixion text belongs in Advent. For, Advent is not about pretending everything is fine. Advent is about longing—longing for God's reign of mercy to break into this world, longing for justice to be made real, longing for a love fierce enough to heal. Advent is a season of active hope—leaning toward the world God promises, trusting that Christ is bringing it near.

And here at WPLC, that hope is taking shape. Our Advent theme this year is Standing in Solidarity and it is not abstract. It's embodied in the work we are doing with our ministry partners: supporting Latino/a congregations walking with vulnerable families, supporting RefugeeOne as newcomers rebuild their lives, supporting Opportunity Palestine as students learn and grow amid

instability. It's embodied in the ADA accessibility construction around us—widened doorways, new pathways, and an accessible restroom. It is not just a building project. It is solidarity made structural. It is active hope poured into concrete and steel. It is us saying, "God's world belongs to every body, and we are preparing space for that world now."

You see, advent invites us not to wait for God's future, but to anticipate it—to mirror it, to practice it, to prepare the way. Not because we have to but because we have an opportunity to respond to God's gifts. And so when harm happens to us, when fear rises, when the world says, "Save yourself," we have another option. We can pause. We can breathe. We can respond with dignity. Not because we must, but because Christ has already stood with us in our suffering and opened the way.

And so, as we enter this week, hold on to the reminder that: You are not required to be perfect. You are not commanded to forgive instantly. You are not expected to be Jesus. Know that you are invited into a way of compassion that can change the world in small, powerful ways. You are invited into solidarity—one choice, one breath, and one act of hope at a time. Because, dear friend, Advent is not wishful thinking. Advent is certainty in Christ—certainty that God's mercy is stronger than cruelty, that God's presence is deeper than fear, that God's reign is already breaking in. Amen.