

**November 27, 2016**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon - "Living in Hope"**

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Today marks the beginning of a new church year as well as the first Sunday in Advent.

We begin to prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of our Savior, but we are reminded that Jesus is ever present in our lives.

While our gospel reading foretells disasters and disruptions to our lives, both the psalmist and Isaiah provide messages of hope – a peaceful future where God's rule will reign supreme.

These three readings taken together aptly describe our own human lives.

We live through unexpected changes and we most often survive those upheavals by nurturing hope.

We light a candle of hope, dreaming of a time when peace will reign – when our swords will indeed be hammered into plowshares.

We wait, with what Henri Nouwen calls 'eager hope' for good to prevail, for order to be restored, for our fears to be diminished.

Nouwen warns "If we do not wait patiently in expectation for God's coming in glory, we start wandering around, going from one little sensation to another. Our lives get stuffed with newspaper items, television stories, and gossip. Then our minds lose the discipline of discerning between what leads us closer to God and what doesn't, and our hearts gradually lose their spiritual sensitivity."

Jesus tells us clearly that waiting is not passive.

We must actively engage in preparing for Jesus to enter our lives.

We must be ready if he were to walk in the door this moment.

In the last few weeks many people have asked me 'Where is God' in the turmoil we are facing in our country.

My response has been "God is right here, in the midst of the tumult, providing us with the opportunity to live out our faith."

We are challenged in a climate of divisiveness to be bridge builders.

Our faith demands that we reach out to our neighbors with love, seeking to build God's beloved community.

Last Sunday the church council continued discerning how to express our welcome to the world and declare that we are an open and affirming church.

This is where we are, today:

We, the Salisbury Congregational Church, seek to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds and love our neighbors as ourselves.

This Church declares itself to be Open to all for participation, membership, leadership and employment regardless of race, ancestry, class, gender identity, physical/mental ability or sexual orientation.

We further declare ourselves to be Affirming of each individual as a child of God, celebrating the total identity of each person.

As a declared Open and Affirming Congregation, we commit ourselves to work toward ending ignorance, fear, hatred, prejudice and discrimination against any person including our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers.

*No matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!*

I want you to prayerfully consider these words and more importantly, what they mean.

We will meet together after the holidays, on January 8 to continue our conversation about this important milestone in the church's life.

Then on January 15 – Martin Luther King Sunday – we will bring the statement to the congregation for a vote.

We moved up the schedule in response to the cultural shifts that seem to be happening in our country.

I think it is important for the church to be a leading voice for peace in the world today.

Let me offer some explanation of each part of the proposed statement:

*We, the Salisbury Congregational Church, seek to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds and love our neighbors as ourselves.*

We certainly heard at the annual meeting, and it was reiterated as a priority by the council, that the life of our church be rooted in the scriptural mandate of the great commandment: that we love God with our heart, soul and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.

This seems to me to be the most important value we profess and one that should serve as a guiding principle of all that we do.

*This Church declares itself to be Open to all for participation, membership, leadership and employment regardless of race, ancestry, class, gender identity, physical/mental ability or sexual orientation.*

We labored over whether or not to list these categories of marginalization.

We didn't want to label people.

The decision to include this list was motivated by the position of those people who are included in this list.

In conversations with people who have experienced bigotry and bias based on these categories, they resoundingly voiced the need to be named and acknowledged.

*We further declare ourselves to be Affirming of each individual as a child of God, celebrating the total identity of each person.*

This, for me, would seem like a no-brainer for a Christian community.

“Affirming” means to maintain as ‘true.’

To affirm someone means to accept them for exactly who they are – who God created them to be.

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*No matter where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here!*

Well, when you ask where is God in today’s tumultuous times, I would say God is right in front of us asking us to be brave enough to live into our Christian heritage.

A Christian is a person who follows Christ, one who works to be Christlike in all relationships.

A Christian heart is full of love for other people; for the earth; for the church and community.

A Christian heart yearns for peace and justice in the world – the whole world.

A Christian heart is open to accept Jesus whenever he might return, in whatever guise he might appear.

The great biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has compared this week’s beautiful passage from the prophet Isaiah to the “I have a dream” speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

We are meant to be dreamers.

We must always envision a better world.

We must dedicate our lives to building peace and understanding every place we find ourselves.

God is the One who brings these dreams to reality, but there’s work for us to do, too, in re-shaping the instruments of war, violence, hatred and destruction into instruments of peace and provision for all.

My friends, on this first Sunday of advent as we light the candle of Hope, let us commit to bringing God’s light into the world.

Let us be a congregation that stands for love, not hate;

For peace, not war;

for abundance, not scarcity;

for faith, not fear.

Let’s make this the first day of a new year where we commit to distinguishing ourselves as radical followers of Jesus Christ.

Let us be the dreamers who transform the world to the one God envisioned.