

All is not calm; all is not bright

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Two winters ago, on the third Sunday of Advent, Chicago was decorated by a beautiful blanket of snow as folks ventured out to work, brunch, shopping or houses of worship. The sideways-blowing snow and icy white-capped waves of Lake Michigan shimmered. Cars and busses drove slower than usual, but nobody seemed to mind.

It was a Winter Wonderland along the Gold Coast and Magnificent Mile, posh areas north of downtown. Yet the scene was even more serene on the South Side, sans commercial retailers and Trump Tower-level wealth. The streets, typically filled with teenagers, were vacant and still. The sidewalks, often lit with gunfire, were sparkling with snow.

There was no noise. There were no signs of gangs or drugs or violence, of darkness or despair, of broken homes or unemployment. There was only the soft blanket of peace.

I continued to ponder this scene as I settled into my pew. During the time for prayer requests, people asked for prayers of healing for loved ones, jobs for the jobless, recovery from addictions, and comfort for the grieving.

Then a teenage girl stood up and said she would like us to pray for her friend's family, because her friend had been shot and killed earlier that week. Our hearts collectively sank as she made her very matter-of-fact request: her friend, barely a teenager, died. From a gunshot wound. And she misses her.

Throughout the service I wanted to lean forward and hug her, to tell her that she's safe, that everything will be fine. I wanted to tell her that she doesn't have to be scared to walk home from school alone. But I can't. This is her reality, and the reality of many on the South Side: guns, gangs, drugs and violence. This is the kingdom they encounter daily.

Each year, many of us on the South Side look forward to the winter season—not because we love the lake-effect snow, but because there is less violence in the winter. It's too cold to stand around outside, too cold to fight in the school parking lot. Chicago's crisp winters are a welcome reprieve from the sting of violence.

This reprieve gives teenagers time to wonder as they grieve their killed and wounded friends. They wonder what will happen to themselves, their brothers and sisters, their friends. They wonder what high school will look like if junior high is already so painful. And they know that the warmer months will soon return.

On that third Sunday of Advent, I wondered what the season of waiting means to our teenagers here on the South Side. I imagine they understand waiting better than most people do. They know what it's like to long for the Prince of Peace from deep within their gut, to beg Jesus to watch over them and walk with them. They understand that God has to be with us in order for things to change. And they've seen first-hand the destructiveness of empire and the unfairness of King Herods. Their greatest hope is to catch a glimpse of the Christ Child. They *are* Advent.

Bundled up in the prophets' promises and the beliefs of those who have gone before us, we venture into the streets to make our way to the manger. We know the clean snow of winter is a temporary illusion, that all is not calm and bright. Yet we believe

that all children are promised a day when violence will be no more, that the streets will be paved with peace as gentle and glamorous as a fresh blanket of snow.