

First Sunday of Advent - A (2025)

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

‘Jesus said to the disciples, “But about that day and hour no one knows ... keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”’ In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It’s official! The frenzy that revolves around parties, gift shopping, Christmas concerts and parades, holiday travels, and overused credit cards is now upon us. We know the countdown to Christmas has started because Black Friday arrived a couple of days ago. The variety of pumpkin spice coffee drinks at Starbucks has been replaced, or at least phased out, with peppermint mochas and eggnog lattes. Our streets and neighborhoods are becoming more congested with the ubiquitous Amazon delivery trucks, some arriving like Santa at mysterious times of the night.

It is against this onslaught of activity that Advent arrives. As Vicki+ mentioned last Sunday, Advent marks the New Year for the church, albeit without all the hullabaloo of festive celebration or extravagant pomp and circumstance. For Christians, Advent is the period where we intentionally swim upstream against the attitudes and frenetic energies of the surrounding culture. It is a time where we anticipate the celebration of the birth of our coming Messiah in a manger in the backwater town of Bethlehem, while we contemplate that day and hour no one knows, the majestic and time-altering moment when Jesus returns on clouds with great glory, when divine judgment will be on full display.

My favorite Episcopal theologian, the Rev. Dr. Fleming Rutledge, writes the following in her book, Advent, the once and future coming of Jesus Christ, “Advent is the Time Between - between the first coming of Christ and the second coming, between darkness and dawn, between the kingdoms of this world and the

kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. It is not the time of fulfillment; it is the time of waiting.”

‘Waiting’ in the Christian perspective, is not a passive activity. Advent ‘waiting’ is about reorienting our ways of thinking and behaving that enlivens our senses and awakens our souls. Jesus reminds his followers that they/we are to ‘keep awake,’ for we do not know on what day our Lord is coming. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to ‘wake from sleep’....for salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers...” This is one of the wonders of Advent, its call to a renewed commitment to ‘pay attention,’ to shake off the ordinariness of life, of ‘business as usual’ that, over time, dull our senses and reinforce the ruts we’ve dug for ourselves. We heard from the prophet Isaiah of the people in Noah’s time living and doing the ordinary things of life, aware that Noah was busy preparing for the cataclysmic event soon to appear, but who failed to heed the coming devastation to their peril. Attentive Advent ‘waiting’ springs forth a renewed hope that the promises of God will not go unfulfilled, that the promises we seek are still coming.

A particular theme of the first three Advent gospel readings focuses on judgment. Most Episcopalians I have known are not too keen on talking, let alone preaching, about sin and judgment. I have been part of conversations with our fellow Episcopalians, good people indeed, who are counting on God’s unlimited mercy and that *all* will ultimately be saved. We call that the doctrine of universalism. Nice idea, but Scripture teaches judgment that has eternal consequences, both good and bad. Without an understanding about sin, our participation with and in it, and its consequences, how can we recognize the soberness and holiness of God’s judgment if we are ‘asleep’ to its reality? How can we respond to John the Baptist’s call to repent and live lives worthy of said repentance, if we are ‘asleep’ to the sinful thoughts and actions that infect our lives and relationships?

While not in the lectionary readings for this Advent season, let us hear again Jesus’ warning about being unprepared for his coming through several parables, that being ready yields rewards and blessings. They immediately follow today’s Gospel reading in Matthew. The second of four deals with the Ten Bridesmaids, five who were foolish and five who were wise. We know the story. The five wise

bridesmaids were ready, having prepared their lamps that were trimmed and burning, waiting for the bridegroom's arrival. The five foolish bridesmaids failed to properly prepare. The gist of the parable is that the five wise and prepared bridesmaids were 'awake' and welcomed into the banquet. The five foolish and unprepared bridesmaids were told, "*I do not know you.*" Let those words from Jesus sit with you for a moment.

The fourth is the Final Judgment, the famous story of the shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats with the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Again, we know the story. Those who responded to the needs of others were, in fact, serving God, the sheep. They were 'awake' to the call on their lives and responded accordingly. Unfortunately, those goats at his left hand were 'sleepwalking' through life, failing to see and respond to the needs of others. "And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life."

Believers through the millennia have heard the herald's call that Jesus is coming soon, so soon in fact, that there might not be enough time to change their ways. The fact that Jesus has not returned yet is not because God is late; it is because God is patient and gracious, giving us chance after chance to 'wake up.' This is Good News, friends. This in-between time in which we live is fleeting, a gift from God for all who embrace it; a joyful time filled with godly-inspired hope and peace.

Today's lectionary readings tell us to be 'awake,' to 'get' ready and 'live' ready, but do not mention 'how.' Let's start with some tried-and-true options:

- Despite all the craziness that surrounds us, embrace this time of darkness and quiet. Pay attention to the rising and setting of the sun. Notice how creation is functioning as fall moves towards winter. Watch for God's handiwork.
- Pray and study scripture. Find Advent meditations and help reflect on this season of preparation.
- Gratefully reflect on the preciousness of the gift of time and the value of relationships.
- Give up the need to complete checklists as a way of measuring 'success.'

- Ask God to take away any needs we have for control and renew in us trust in his faithfulness and sovereignty.
- Be on the lookout for how God is working in and through you and how you are responding.
- Regular attendance in worship.
- Seek opportunities to serve others with a heightened awareness of Christ's image in them.
- Follow the example of Brother Lawrence, a famous Catholic religious monastic, who practiced the presence of God by making continuous, silent conversation with God, viewing all his daily tasks, no matter how mundane, as opportunities to connect with him. Talk about paying attention!

Advent reminds us that 'business as usual' as the world knows it *will* come to an end; and that Christ's Second Coming will be unmistakable. Advent reminds us that God is patient as it affirms that God will bring forth the New Jerusalem at the appointed time, the time only known to God the Father. Advent is filled with the hope of what God has promised and assures us that his faithfulness can be trusted. Intentional Advent preparation is what allows us to celebrate Christ's birth with childlike surprise and joy, not exhaustion. Proper Advent preparation awakes us from sleep and inspires life energized by Spirit and Truth.

Finally, more Good News! Our judge is also our redeemer and his delay, as I mentioned earlier, is nothing but grace. The question before us becomes, 'what do we do with this gift of sheer grace'? How will our lives reflect the joy, peace, and hope that are part-and-parcel of an Advent-prepared life? Believers need not worry about Christ's return if prepared -- even *more* Good News! We can live in this in-between time with great assurance proclaiming the truth of our faith: 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!'

I leave you with the lyrics from the last stanza of Hymn 68 from the Advent section of the hymnal:

*Our hope and expectation, O Jesus, now appear; Arise, thou
Sun so longed for, above this darkened sphere! With hearts and*

*hands uplifted, we plead, O Lord to see The day of earth's
redemption, and ever be with thee!*

Come, Lord Christ. We're ready.