

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid
 A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent | Year B | Mark 13:24-37
 St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA
 3 December 2017

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Welcome to the beginning of another year in the Church of God, where today, on this First Sunday of Advent, we begin again a practice that people just like you and me have done for centuries upon centuries -- we wait for the coming of Christ.

There is a certain challenge to this season. All around us, there are certain signs of what season the rest of the world thinks it is -- you probably could have bought a Christmas tree in September at most stores these days -- and much of our society is completely willing to skip over Advent altogether. Advent *has* tried to make a dent into popular culture though, and there are the multitude of so-called "Advent Calendars" that, yes, help you count down the days until Christmas Day, but very few of them anymore have anything to do with living into the truth of the season of Advent. Some have food; some have toys; some have a bottle of wine or beer for every day of December. Advent has become an odd time not of waiting but indulging in some sense of a holiday spirit instead of a time of preparation and attentiveness to what God is doing in our lives here and now as we welcome the coming of Christ at Christmas.

So before you grab your iPhone and buy one of those wine calendars from Amazon, let me first encourage and invite us to remember what this season is really about and how we might best live into what it has to offer. Advent, first and foremost, is about anticipating Christ's coming into this world as the babe of Bethlehem; the Word made flesh who came to us to fulfill God's promises of the coming Messiah, to show us what the love of God looked like in human form, to teach us the love of God, and to die for our salvation. There is certainly much to prepare for, much to look ahead to, but I might recommend as we start this season doing two things before we look ahead.

First:

Let us look to the past. In the coming weeks, we will remember the words of the prophets who foretold that the one who would be the ruler of Israel, the one who was from of old, from ancient days, would come from tiny little Bethlehem; that his name will be Immanuel, God with us. It was their hope that, when the fullness of time had finally come, God would send the long-awaited Messiah, that he would bring good news to the poor, that he would bind up the brokenhearted, that he would comfort those who mourn. We will be reminded of where we've come from as the inheritors of God's covenant. We will hear the story of the people of God even from the very beginning. We might consider that our waiting can resonate with those who waited before us -- like Abraham, who, though he was promised God's covenant and many descendants, had to patiently await the fulfillment of those promises for decades at a time. We wait like Mary and Joseph waited -- that after the good news of Jesus' future birth was announced to them by the angels, they first prepared a place for him in their very hearts. Yes, we are very much those faithful people in the history of the story of God's people who awaited the fulfillment of God's covenants in ages past—we wait for that promised moment when Christ will return to this world. Like them, we do not know the day or the hour that God's promise will be fulfilled, but we believe in faith that he will come again to restore all things to himself.

Second:

Let us appreciate that God, though asking us to look ahead to Christ's coming, calls us in the present time. For we believe in a God who is always active, always doing something in the present tense, a God who is with us in this very moment and in every current moment. That is, perhaps, the greatest truth of this season -- that even if Advent shifts our focus to the stories of our past and to the glory of God's future -- it also makes very clear to us that we must actively prepare and actively wait now. Waiting for God's future reign is not a passive exercise, after all. Jesus describes the work of his disciples also in the present tense, with great action and attentiveness needed to fulfill our calling. "Beware." "Keep alert." "Keep awake." Just as the servants of a great household must remain vigilant when the master is away, it is our job

to care for the house, for each other and for the world, until he returns -- and then we must ensure that it will be ready for him when he comes at an unexpected hour.

This may sound like too difficult an ask, How can we be expected to prepare the world for the coming of Christ—to keep constantly alert? We cannot possibly spend each moment of our lives like the doorkeeper staring only at the door of the house. This is where the "now" of God comes into play. Though Jesus' commands this day are of great consequence, they are not given so that we would abandon all that we're doing in order to watch for his coming -- they are given as a reminder that we can look for him and be ready for him in all that we do. Remember that God came to Abraham many times, but there were many years in between his visits. It is not that Abraham had to be constantly at the ready in every moment -- but instead, when God did come, he was ready in that specific moment. When God spoke to him, he was always ready to listen and follow where God was leading him. Abraham did not sleep when God asked him to be awake.

Let us wait for Christ as Abraham waited for God -- we must be prepared, not necessarily constantly preparing. There is a distinct difference. To be constantly preparing is to nervously find unnecessary chores around the house, to dust and redust the same clean surfaces in preparation for the master's return. To be prepared is to dust off the shelves, and then to be attentive to whether the dust settles again before the master comes. To be prepared is to be always mindful of the state of the house, living in a state of readiness regardless of what we are doing -- so that when the master does come, we will be ready to receive him then and there, in that very moment of now. God will always come in the now. Christ will return in a real and present moment. Likewise, the work of the household servants is to be ready for the now, not for the later.

This season let us ask ourselves -- if we are servants to whom the master has entrusted the keeping of his house, what kind of house will he find when he returns? Will he find a house that has been prepared for his coming, or will he find many chores left to be done because we thought we had more time? And what kind of work are we doing in the now of our lives so that we will be ready when he comes? In this time of year that can often be hectic and rushed and loud and crazy, I encourage us each to make our time and our preparation for Christmas by recognizing the moments of God's now every day. May our Advent calendars be full of prayers, when we prepare for Christ in the calm, in moments of quiet, asking God to help keep alert and awake for how he will call us each and every day. For when we do, we will find that there is a joy in this work. There is a joy in remembering that Immanuel, God with us, is coming soon and is already here now. Let us then come to know the joy of Abraham, who waited patiently and actively; let us come to know the joy of Mary and Joseph, who knew of his coming and prepared a place in their hearts for the babe of Bethlehem; and let us come to know the joy of our master, Christ our Lord, who will come in a great and present moment, ready to greet those who have prepared a place for him.

Amen.