

CHRISTMAS TIME: I - A TIME OF PREPARATION

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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1st Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:24-37

The other day, on Thanksgiving morning, I went out to my driveway to pick up my two newspapers, the Cecil Whig and the Wilmington News Journal, and I almost needed a wheelbarrow to carry them back to the house. They were both huge - chocked, not full of news, but full of sales circulars trumpeting all of the great deals that would be available, not just on Black Friday, but some as early as 10 p.m. on Thanksgiving night! The message was, clearly, don't delay - get out there now and get those presents, get those deals, get ready for Christmas!

No matter that Christmas is still a month away! We all know that we started seeing Christmas displays come up just after school began! And I want to tell you that I boycotted by favorite radio station - WJBR - because they began playing all Christmas all the time about the second week in November. Come on now!! Enough already!

Now, it's not because I don't like Christmas music, it's because it just serves to support the frenzy of buying and busyness that have become a part of our culture and our lives. And it is so easy to get pulled into that kind of thinking and behavior.

Well, today's Gospel lesson will, very quickly, correct the course for us. Today's Gospel lesson reminds us in very vivid language what Advent is all about. The word "Advent" you may know, means "arrival." The season of Advent is meant to be a time when we prepare for the arrival of Christ - not just remembering His arrival in a manger in Bethlehem, but also remembering that He will come again, there will be a second coming.

You know, that's not something we usually talk a lot about, except at Advent. But it is something that we talked a lot about this year, thanks to a pastor by the name of Harold Camping. Remember him? He's the one that predicted Christ would come on May 21st, and then when that didn't happen, he said he had miscalculated, and it would actually be on October 21st.

While neither of those dates turned out to be true, there has still been a lot of talk about the end coming because of events occurring lately - droughts, terrible

storms, earthquakes, unrest. Lots of people have suggested that these are all signs that time is coming to an end. While some of those predictions irritate me, I don't think it's such a bad thing that people are talking like that - because at least it makes us remember that there will be a day when Christ comes again. What makes me sad is that, generally, when people talk about the end of time coming, they do it with fear and dread. They do it with a sense of horrible finality - instead of remembering that it will be a time when God will make all things right.

Look back at the Gospel lesson, and remember that the early followers of Christ, were eagerly looking forward to His return. From the day He left them physically, they looked forward to His coming back. And they thought it would be any day. Read through the scriptures, and you'll realize that they really, truly thought it would be any day - so they anticipated it, and they prepared for it, they watched for it.

Trouble is, as the years have gone by, and turned into centuries, the people of God have let down their guard. Because it didn't happen quickly, their watchfulness turned into complacency, and they began to not think about it too much - not unlike us, perhaps.

Advent is the opportunity for us to set that right. Advent is our annual opportunity to prepare for the coming of Christ - as I said, not just the baby in the manger, but the Messiah who will come again one day. So how do we do that? How do we prepare our hearts for Christmas and for the Second Coming? Well, I want to suggest that we do it in exactly the same ways.

Let me suggest a few of them.

First, we prepare for the arrival of Christ by remembering with signs and symbols. There are abundant ways to do that in Advent - both here in the church and in our individual lives. We need only look around and see all the ways we do that in the church in Advent.

We remember when we light the Advent wreath each week. We remember with every candle the light of Christ that burns brightly in the world. We look at the circle of the wreath and remember God's unending love, shown most perfectly in the baby born in Bethlehem. We light the candles of hope, joy, love and peace and know that God's hope, joy, love and peace became real in the person of Christ, and that one day, when He comes again, hope, joy, love and peace will reign forever and ever.

We remember too, through the colors of Advent, that we see on the paraments and vestments. The color purple, the color of royalty, reminds us that this baby was no mere baby, He was, and is, King of King and Lord of Lords, and

that, when He comes again, He will reign over the Kingdom of God in all its fullness and completeness.

We remember through the greens hanging around the room - not just pretty additions to an already pretty room - but symbols of God's everlasting, never-changing love for us, and symbols of everlasting life that is ours because of Christ Jesus.

We remember as we build the nativity scene week by week, that in God's time, and in God's way, the Messiah came into the world, and that, just the same, in God's time and in God's way, He will come again.

And we remember through the scriptures and through the music that we hear and sing.

During Advent, we do a lot of remembering, and we don't do it just to be nostalgic, we remember as a way to prepare our hearts yet again. We do it to remind ourselves that the God who acted in the past, still acts today, and promises to act until that day comes when His kingdom is fulfilled.

We remember, that in Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem, God came to us to bring justice, to save us from ourselves, to bridge the gulf between us and Him. God came in Jesus to show us perfect love.

Knowing that, remembering that, we ought to be preparing for His second coming with expectancy and joy, not fear and foreboding. When Christ comes again, God's kingdom will be fulfilled, righteousness and justice will reign, all will be made right. Why should that be something to fear?

A writer named Sarah Breuer put it this way: "I know that there are people who want to say that the Day of the Lord should inspire terror, but we know something that they don't seem to realize: the person we call Lord is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, who taught and healed, who welcomed the outcast and broke bread with anyone willing to eat with him. It's Jesus, whose way of life and manner of death underscored what his words taught: love your enemies. When we know Jesus, the Jesus of the gospels, we know that God is love, and love drives out fear." (On-line, "Don't Panic, Respond with Love," Rev. Sarah Dylan Breuer)

Indeed, the second coming of Christ should be something to watch for with anticipation and expectancy. It should be something for which you and I should be prepared, not scared. We can prepare for it by living expectantly, in a way that is pleasing to Him, or as one pastor put it, "to live with the intensity of last days while living our regular lives." (On-line, "Time's Up," Mary Anderson)

That same pastor, Mary Anderson, challenged her congregation with these questions as they pondered this subject. She asked them:

What if you knew you had only one month left in your life? Would you finish up important matters at work? Would you travel to a place you always wanted to go? Would you pray more, go to church more, do that generous act you always wanted to do for others? Would you find ways to leave a mark on the world? Would you reconcile a fractured friendship? By answering yes to one or more of these possibilities (she said), we indicate that in our last days we would be better stewards of all the things God has given us in this life - better than we are now. In the intensity of last days, we would live better, be better. We would be more generous, more focused on the most important things in life. The question is (she concluded), Why do we need to under threat of death to be better stewards? (Ibid.)

She's on to something, I think. She's on to the fact that being Christians calls us to live everyday with intensity - intense love, intense awareness of God's love, intense attention to opportunities to share His love, intense awareness of the signs of God's kingdom all around us, even today.

Perhaps, this Advent, that is the best way we can prepare for Christ - by living fully and faithfully, living with intense love for those around us, intense awareness of God's love and God's presence right here and right now, and mostly intense trust in Him who sent Jesus to save us.

Someone I read this week suggested that a good way for us to go about doing that is to draw on our own experiences in childhood - for us to think back on what it was like to look forward to Christmas, on all the things we did to prepare for it, on all the things that made it the most wonderful time of the year.

Remember how exciting it was to decorate the house and the tree; to wrap presents and to juggle ones with our name on them to see if we could figure out what we were getting? Remember baking cookies with your Mom, and visiting relatives with your family? Remember making your Christmas list, and then going to Newberrys or the mall to sit on Santa's lap and make sure he had your list right? Remember how every day closer to Christmas got more and more exciting, until you could almost burst! Remember going to church and singing "Away in a Manger" and being allowed to hold a lit candle? And then remember how hard it was to sleep on Christmas Eve, and how really hard it was to wait until your parents said it was okay to come downstairs and open up the presents?

Think back on all of those things, and feel that joy and excitement again, remember the anticipation of good things to come. Can you embrace that same feeling this Advent, no matter how old you are? Can you wait actively and enthusiastically? Can you imagine all the good that Christ will bring? Can you

celebrate how much God loves you, how He showed you when He sent Jesus, and how He shows you every day, and one day, how He will show all the world in a magnificent way?

Friends, in the midst of this hectic, chaotic, too-often troubled world, let us enter this season of Advent with joy, preparing our hearts and our lives for the Jesus who came in a manger so long ago, and who will, in God's time, come again one day. Let our prayer this day and every day be: Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Amen.