

“Advent List”
November 29, 2020
First Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24: 36,42-44

Things were not going well in Matthew’s church. Murder, persecution, death, and devastation. Darkness was overwhelming. And he tells them:

“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.

So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

I heard someone say: If you’re sick of Christmas on Dec 25th, you’re not doing Advent right.

I love Advent. Everything about it. I love the preparing. The anticipation. The music. The candles.

Advent is a season that asks us to wait and prepare for the coming of Christmas into our messy lives.

Advent means arrival. We wait and prepare and hope for the arrival of God into the world. Into our world.

This year it is easy to forget.

We get distracted by all the bad news, and gatherings that are not going to happen and even anger to how it was then and how it is now and all the twitter headlines and bad news emails.

And it seems so dark.

Not just the news and the world, but literally dark.

This is the darkest time of year.

Especially in the North Midwest, we have this winter darkness thing down. Maybe that’s why I love Michigan and Minnesota (where I am from) so much, because the darkness here is REAL.

The days are getting shorter and will keep getting shorter until December 21st, which we sometimes call the longest night.

And it is into this darkness that Christ comes.

So, we need Advent. Every year. Especially this year We need this season: to stop and look and wait and watch. We need to prepare room for the Light of Christ to give birth.

So, we come together today, on this first Sunday in Advent. And we begin to slowly bring light into the darkness.

We light the first candle for hope.

Did you hear the words the candle lighter said?

“On the first Sunday of Advent, we look for signs of hope in our world. People helping each other. Walls of separation being broken down. Bridges crossing great divides. We find signs of hope in a family, traveling a long way from home, expecting a baby and being surrounded by the compassion of strangers. We lit this first candle for the hope we find in the world, as we wait for Christ to come into our world and lives in a new way.

One candle is lit so we can see – the hope of the age.

Hope – that Christ is coming. That is new light is revealing. This is the not yet – the hopeful anticipation of Advent that I love so much. Because most of us have experienced it already.

And instead of making it boring, we just know how awesome it’s going to be. It’s like going to bed and knowing that tomorrow is going to be the best day ever.

You know what I mean? Your eyes pop open in the morning and you’re just full of excitement for what’s to come.

Wake up!

Wake up!

The day is finally here!

God’s promise is coming true!

And we don’t want to miss it.

This is Advent. It’s when we wake up. When we get ready.

I think Matthew’s Gospel today reminds us not just that Jesus is coming this Advent, but instead tells us the HOW.

And how Jesus arrives each Advent is important.

And he does it in two ways – one, unexpectedly – and two, as a thief. Jesus is coming at an unexpected hour, so we have to get ready – and stay awake – so that we don't miss it.

I'm sorry it has been used like a scare tactic; like Jesus is coming soon you better get your act together. You'd better get your act together because you don't know when Jesus will come.

Now I don't know what you picture when you hear that – but I picture this a jack in the box. Jesus could jump out any time – so be ready!

And I don't really love jack in the boxes. They are kind of like clowns. They jump out when you have your guard down. You know what I mean? When the jack in the box is about to pop – you kind of lean away and tense up because you know it's going to scare you – but you don't know exactly when it's going to happen.

So, Jesus is not a jack in the box. Or a clown behind the curtain. We don't need to be scared by his coming.

But the unexpected nature of Jesus's arrival – is purposeful. Not to scare us – but to remind us that it will happen. See, if we know when Jesus is coming and how He's coming – we might not let it happen.

We like a life we can count on – good or bad. When we are certain of the way life is and how it's going to turn out.

If we don't think we know – we want to bar the doors. If we're honest – we don't really want to wake up, and we don't actually want to make room.

So, this surprise of Jesus isn't to scare us, but to remind us – that the arrival of Jesus into the world is going to interrupt it. It's not what's expected ... And we know this.

We know that time and time again – we'll hear Jesus say and watch him do the opposite of what is expected.

This is just the beginning of the ways in which Jesus is going to break into the world. Even if we know it's coming, it still has a way of surprising us.

Try this.

An Advent List.

Not a Christmas list, but an Advent list. To make room for this new surprise.

Today we lit the candle of hope – the hope that while we wait and prepare – we hope. we hope. And we hope. Hope for this holy thief to come and break in and interrupt the status quo and steal the things that are weighing us down.

I want to invite you to make your Advent List. Find some paper and a pencil or pen.

Here is mine:

I asked Jesus to come and take rid of my need to always be right and perfect, to steal my doubt that I am enough, to rob me of my exceptional ability to worry instead of hope.

What about you?

What is making the arrival (the advent) of Jesus difficult for you right now? What do you need Jesus to come in and steal from your life? See if you can make an Advent list.

(Take the time for this two-minute activity now)

I want to end with a refection by Fredrick Buechner – about what to do while we wait – He says: I think we are waiting. That is what is at the heart of it. Even when we don't know that we are waiting, I think we are waiting.

Even when we can't find words for what we are waiting for, I think we are waiting.

An ancient Advent prayer supplies us with the words. "Give us grace," it says, "that we may cast off the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light."

We who live much of the time in the darkness are waiting not just at Advent, but at all times for the advent of light, of that ultimate light that is redemptive and terrifying at the same time.

It is redemptive because it puts an end to the darkness, and that is also why it is terrifying, because for so long, for all our lives, the darkness has been home, and because to leave home is always cause for terror.

So, to wait for Christ to come in his fullness is not just a passive thing, a pious, prayerful, churchly thing.

On the contrary, to wait for Christ to come in his fullness is above all else to act in Christ's stead as fully as we know how.

To wait for Christ is as best we can to be Christ to those who need us to be Christ to them most and to bring them the most we have of Christ's healing and hope because unless we bring it, it may never be brought at all.