

“Enter Advent,” Advent 1: December 1, 2019

Matthew 24:36-44

Pastor Judy Bangsund

On this first Sunday in Advent, I greet you in Jesus’ name!

Or, perhaps I should say, “Happy New Year!” Because today is the first day of the new church year. As Christians, we count time not by months starting in January, but by seasons beginning in Advent – the 4 Sundays leading up to Christmas. We do this because Christmas – the celebration of Jesus’ birth – is where it all begins. And so we light the Advent wreath, giving the candles names like peace, hope, joy and trust as we count out the weeks. Sometimes you hear other names as well, but these were chosen to match the themes of our weekly Gospel texts. And notice the shape of the wreath: obviously a circle, symbolizing eternity – because something is happening here that is more than what meets the eye. It’s *eternal*. It doesn’t end on Dec 25, but rather continues on through the church year *and beyond*. Advent gives us the countdown to Christmas, because such a momentous event requires preparation. But not, as many believe, JUST for Christmas. There’s so much more.

To illustrate, I’m going to tell you a true story. A friend of ours was (at that time) the father of several small children, one of whom was just learning how to cross the street. One day he was teaching her to look both ways. They did this and then proceeded to cross. As they walked, the dad quizzed his little girl: “When we look both ways, what are we looking for?” She looked up at him and said, her eyes serious, “Bugs.”

Well, bugs are a good thing to watch for, but possibly not the most important thing! And are we any different, as we “prepare” for Jesus’ birth, getting distracted by Christmas shopping, cooking, decorating and all the fun stuff that seems so important to us? Don’t get me wrong; I love those things too! But if that’s our focus, we stand in danger of looking for bugs as more important matters whiz by.

Advent is a wake-up call. *Wake up!* it says. *Look up! Widen your horizons. Jesus is coming!* Advent has a dual focus. It is preparation for the celebration of Christmas, when God took on human flesh and entered the fray of a troubled world. It is also preparation for Jesus’ return at the end of time, when all God’s promises will finally and completely be fulfilled, setting the world to rights and ushering in his government of justice and peace. When war will be no more, as we read in our first lesson; even the lion will lie down with the lamb. No enmity of any kind, on any level. What a world that will be!

Advent must be observed with this dual focus. The Incarnation is so important! But our modern world has taken Christmas and turned it into Santas and grinchies and snowmen. It has

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devolved into Hallmark sentimentality – all the stuff we enjoy so much, but which – when taking center stage – finally disappoints. What if your family isn’t all there? What if there has been a recent loss? What if your own living situation is less than ideal, or your travel plans go awry, or you lose your job and can’t afford anything? Then the modern version of Christmas becomes quite hollow; worse, it can usher in feelings of despair as the world around you seems to be carried away by a level of happiness that just passes you by. No; this is not what God had intended when he sent his son to be born in a manger and angels sang about peace on earth.

Advent stubbornly clings to a wider view, one that takes into account a troubled world, a world that inevitably disappoints. We, especially as Americans, are not prepared for disappointment. We are always expecting things to improve. Consider those affected by recent PG&E power outages: the first (and even the second) wave of such events caught people woefully unprepared. Food spoiled; businesses lost money; the daily lives of thousands were disrupted. Or, what about earthquakes? We in California are told to prepare for the “Big One.” Are you prepared? My guess is that, like me, you tend rather to hope for the best. We think: *we’re safe; it won’t be so bad. Technology will warn us in time. Something will work out.* We tend to expect improvement, not disappointment.

Let’s take that mindset to a personal level. We don’t prepare for personal tragedies, either. Is your will up to date? Cancer, heart disease, dementia, death – we may worry about these things, but when they actually happen, we are taken by surprise. We are not prepared. And here is the point: our American mindset is invested in the next new thing. Technology. Modern medicine. So we don’t plan for the worst. We hope for the best. We *expect* the best to happen.

Pretty much, our hopes are invested in this life. But when you invest *all* your hopes and dreams into this life, the eventual result will be disappointment. It’s an imperfect world. The perfect wedding, perfect job, perfect spouse, perfect Christmas – don’t exist. Something, someone will let you down. Life lets you down. And it’s so very disappointing. Sometimes it leads to despair. What’s worse, many people lose faith. “Isn’t God supposed to protect me? What was God thinking? Where is God in all of this?” are questions that are often asked. The underlying assumption is that God’s job is to make our lives happy, secure and successful. When that doesn’t happen, we feel abandoned by God. Some lose faith altogether.

Enter Advent. Yes, Advent prepares us for Christmas. But Advent also sets us up for the coming of God’s good and sovereign rule. The camera rolls way back, away from its focus on a small manger in a tiny corner of Palestine, to pan the whole world, a passing away of the old and the beginning of an entirely new world order, in which Christ is the ruler. When that happens, everyone will follow God’s ways of justice and kindness; no one will rebel. We read it this

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morning in Isaiah. “Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’” This, my friends, is where you should place your hope. *This* is what we’re waiting for! This is the real hope that God offers in Advent.

But we have to prepare. As Jesus warns, this world is going to get worse before it gets better. If you read the entire chapter of Matthew 24, you will find wars and rumors of wars, disasters of every kind. Then comes Jesus’ warning: *be watching; be ready*. Because he will come at the least-expected moment. It will be just like the time of Noah, when everyone was just going about their normal lives before the flood wiped it all away. And – just saying -- the picture painted by Matthew is the exact opposite from what popular notions, such as those offered in the “Left Behind” series, would say. Check it out: the faithful were those left behind in the ark; everyone else was swept away. And just as it was at the time of Noah, so it will be when Jesus returns: you will just be going about your normal life – shopping, working at your desk, studying at school, celebrating weddings and graduations – maybe on Christmas Day, opening presents! – and Jesus will come. Just when you least expect it! So *be ready*.

What does that mean for you? First of all, it means that not all your hopes and dreams will come to fruition in this life. (Some will.) Jesus told us straight, “In this world you will have trouble.” The whole Bible bears witness to that reality, from the disrupted and frustrated lives of God’s people in the Old Testament, to the New Testament with its description of Jesus’ death on a cross, the persecution of the apostles, the apocalyptic painting of this world as it draws to a close. So we, in the 21st century, need to be ready and prepared, knowing it may be more difficult – not less – as the time draws near.

Second, it means to take it seriously. If your journey will take you through a hard patch, you need to prepare. How do we do that, as people of God? Right here. In worship, in Grow Groups, youth groups, classes and more, you will hear God’s word and find encouragement from your fellow believers; in Scripture you will find the truth and be empowered to live accordingly; in prayer you will find strength and direction. Friends, you are not meant to go it alone. God is there for you. Your community of faith is there for you.

And third, act on your faith. When the opportunity arises, speak up about Jesus. Reach out to those who don’t know, or worse – have misunderstood the good news of Jesus. Tell them that – far from wanting to condemn this world -- God sent Jesus to save it! That his love is so great that he sent his only son to die, that we might live. You and I have been invited, as we continue to live in this wonderful and yet troubled world, to participate with God as he transforms it. And there, my friends, is where you will find your joy. That’s where you will find your hope and your peace. God will fulfill all his good intentions, and we get to be a part of the process. I can

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tell you, based on my own experience and what I hear from so many others, that this is when you will find your greatest fulfillment, when you find the most joy. When Jesus predicted troubles in this world, he also said (in the same breath), “Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.” *That’s* good news!

My friends, Advent *is* good news. Jesus came once and he *will* come again. The world *will* be restored to God’s good intentions for it: a place of peace, real justice, kindness, and harmony. Where the name of Jesus will be lifted high by all, and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess him as Lord. Where death will be no more, and the lion will lie down with the lamb. What a world that will be!

I leave you with one final story, again true. Toward the end of World War II, a group of prisoners in a concentration camp were awakened one morning by fellow prisoners whispering the message: “Wake up! Get dressed! Deliverance is at hand!” Word had filtered into the camp that the Allies were approaching – they could hear the rumblings of the tanks -- and that in a matter of hours the gates would be pulled open and they would finally step out into a new day of freedom, a chance to begin their lives anew. The message was quickly passed from bed to bed: “Wake up! Get dressed! Deliverance is at hand!” And soon, whatever prized bits of clothing that had been hidden away were brought out and put on, so they could properly greet their deliverers. This is the anticipation of Advent.

Wake up! Get dressed! Jesus will return – and what a great and glorious day that will be. Already you can hear the rumblings. Salvation is on the move, deliverance is at hand -- it began with Jesus’ birth. And just like the first time, Jesus’ coming will take you by surprise. Are you ready?