

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
First Sunday in Advent – December 3, 2017
Mark 13:24-37

May Christ whose second Coming in power and great glory we await, make us steadfast in faith, joyful in hope, and constant in love. Amen.

Good morning! Welcome to the First Sunday in Advent! Even though Advent arrives every year at the same time, precisely four Sundays before Christmas, I still find myself surprised. November is a busy month in the Mendoza household. Halloween has barely passed before it is my husband Jonathan's birthday on the 14th. A mere 9 days later is my daughter Emma's birthday on the 23rd, often coinciding, like this year, with Thanksgiving and all that entails. The month is an absolute blur of activity, planning, celebration, gift giving, and family visitation. And just as soon as I relax, drowsy and relieved having feasted and celebrated, I am startled awake again with the first Sunday of Advent.

Advent has always been a special time for me, even before I had ever heard of it. Growing up in a non-religious family, we did not celebrate Advent, nor did we celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday for that matter. Even still, these few weeks before Christmas were always a special time, filled with beauty, anticipation, and wonder. As a child, my favorite thing to do was to turn off all the lights in the living room and lay down under the Christmas tree with my head as close as possible to the trunk. Gazing up into the mysterious chaos of branches and lights and ornaments, I lost myself in the beauty and wonder of the tree. It felt like disappearing into a fantasy land that was all my own. It felt as if time stood still and that anything was possible. In this special place, I felt the calming comfort of being loved and protected, as well as the thrilling anticipation that anything might happen next. I realize now, that in this special place, I experienced the wonder and expectation of Advent.

The word advent means "coming," and on this first Sunday in Advent we begin another journey through the Church year. Advent is a season of preparation – preparation for the incarnation of the Christ child and for Christ's coming again in glory to reign over a redeemed creation. In this season, we prepare ourselves to receive Christ in our lives more fully, and to be transformed into his likeness, even as we await his return.

Advent is a season of remembrance and tension. During this time, we remember God's promises to us – promises of salvation and restoration of His beloved creation – and we reflect how God has already been at work in the world. This is also the season in which we recognize that we live in the tension of the already but not yet. In these "between the times", as Karl Barth called it, the kingdom of God is already inbreaking into creation but has not yet reached its fullness. The Christ child has already been born onto the stage of history, and yet is still being incarnated within our hearts. And we reside uncomfortably in the tension between these two states.

Advent is a season of expectant waiting and listening. We are invited to sit in the quiet of this season and listen deeply for the voice of one calling to us from the wilderness. Even in the midst of the noise and busyness of our culture's frantic holiday season, we sense the Advent silence present among us – a silence that is both deep and full, empty and yet alive with potential. Frederick Buechner describes this kind of Advent waiting like this:

“The house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised his baton. In the silence of a midwinter dusk there is far off in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold your breath to listen. ...

The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.”¹

As we wait expectantly in Advent, we work at training our ears and our eyes for the call of Christ, for the quiet signs of God’s kingdom in our midst, for the subtle marks of God’s ongoing work of restoration. This waiting is both an individual exercise but also a communal one. There is good reason that the powerful image of pregnancy is frequently employed for this kind of waiting. Like an expectant parent, we each have our own work of preparation, dreaming, and careful listening, but also like an expectant parent, we need a community with us to share the burden and encourage and support us. This kind of waiting and listening is best done with others, in community, for it requires a level of vulnerability and attention that is difficult to maintain without the help and presence of others.

Lastly, Advent is a season of mystery and uncertainty. In Advent, the veil of our hubris and delusion of control is lifted and we realize that we are powerless in the face of God’s mystery. In this time, there is nothing we can do but to prepare for and keep alert for the signs of what new things God is doing now. In our Gospel lesson today from Mark, Jesus implores us to “beware, keep alert”. He tells the disciples, and us, to “keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: keep awake.” (13:35-37)²

It is my experience that it is imperative that we get ready, that we awaken, not so much in order that we don’t miss out on Christ’s big coming in glory (for I suspect that will be a big enough event to catch even our fickle attention). Rather we are called to wake up and be alert now because the unexpected hour of God’s inbreaking kingdom is always now. Even as we await the fullness of God’s kingdom, we may experience it in part even now.

As Christians, we are an Advent people – an Advent community. Like Israel in exile, we, too, are bound together in our waiting and hopeful expectation for the coming of the Messiah. This hopeful anticipation is so beautifully expressed in the Advent hymn “O come, O come, Emmanuel,” which represents both Israel’s cry for the coming of the Messiah as well as the church’s cry for his return. Episcopal priest and theology professor Justin Holcomb describes the essence of Advent like this:

“While Advent is certainly a time of celebration and anticipation of Christ’s birth, it is more than that. It is only in the shadow of Advent that the miracle of Christmas can be fully understood and appreciated; and it is only in the light of Christmas that the Christian life makes any sense. [Advent lives] between the fulfilled promise of Christ’s first coming and the yet-to-be-fulfilled promise of his

¹ Buechner, Frederick; *Whistling in the Dark*. Harper Collins (New York, 1993), p. 2

² NRSV

second coming... The promise for Israel and the promise for the church is Jesus Christ; he has come, and he will come again.”³

So, in the midst of the holiday season’s noisy roar of frantic activity, holiday celebrations, shopping, and lights, I am grateful for the opportunity that Advent provides us to step away from that for a bit. I am relieved that I am offered a refuge of silence and space for reflection and expectation. A time to become a child again and lie under the lighted Christmas tree, gazing up into its branches and colorful lights. A time to ponder God’s great mysteries and a time to sit quietly and listen deeply for Christ’s call.

During this season of Advent, let us set aside time to reflect on how God has worked in our lives and watch for His movements in the world around us. Let us hope, dream, and anticipate Christ’s promised coming again.... preparing ourselves for him to be born more fully in our lives, as well as to receive the kingdom of God that is already in our midst.

Amen.

³ Holcomb, Justin. *What is Advent?*; Christianity.com <http://www.christianity.com/christian-life/christmas/what-is-advent.html>)