

Getting Ready

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Good morning! Did you know that today is New Years Day on our Church calendar? Today, the first Sunday of Advent starts the church year. So happy new year! This church new year doesn't start with a bang or a big celebration, it starts with—waiting. Advent is a time of waiting. Of course, we are waiting for Christmas—we often have Advent calendars that literally count the days until Christmas! But we are waiting for more than that. On this first Sunday of Advent the church traditionally looks ahead—not back to Christmas, but ahead to when Jesus returns again. And as we wait, God shapes us through our waiting.

Before the first Christmas the people of Israel were waiting. They had been waiting for a LONG time—waiting for God to keep his promises and send the savior to put things right. Our first reading today is from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. This passage is written about the time of exile-- everything that could have gone wrong, had gone wrong. Jerusalem has been destroyed. The temple has been torn to the ground and desecrated. God's people were sent out of the promised land, into exile. Everything was lost. So in today's passage the people are crying out to God: "O tear open the heavens and come down!" "You are our Father, we are the clay, you are our potter, we are all formed by your hand! Don't be so angry with us!" In the time of the exile people were desperate for God to show up. Centuries later, in Jesus' day—people were still waiting for God to appear and put everything right. They still felt abandoned.

Do those long suffering, long waiting believers sound familiar at all to you? In 2020 we are exhausted! Pandemic, earthquake, hurricane force winds! More pandemic! Social unrest like we haven't seen in 50 years. Profound political division. Recession. We just went through a Thanksgiving where we either were separated from loved ones or we weren't and now are worried about whether someone will get sick! We feel surrounded by pain and loss. It is enough make us want to cry out like Isaiah—O come down and save us Lord! Help us! In many ways we are like those Jewish believers—they were waiting for the Messiah to come, and we are waiting for Jesus the Messiah to return. Just like them, we don't know when that time will

be, but we are called to be faithful during this time of waiting. We don't know how much longer we have to wait. We are waiting for a miracle.

But this waiting is hard, isn't it? We don't like to wait—whether it is waiting for a file to load on our phone or laptop, waiting for the light to change, or waiting for the silly person ahead of me in traffic to get a move on---we are impatient. We want it NOW!

Advent is an antidote to our obsession with getting it NOW. It is a season of waiting. Of preparation. Of taking a pause. That seems ironic, since for most of us the weeks leading up to Christmas mean busy-ness. December is often the busiest and most stressful month of the year. Maybe this year it will be a little less busy—maybe this year we can stop; pause; and observe Advent instead of running headlong into the rush of Christmas.

One year in college my last exam didn't end until December 23rd! I remember walking around town kind of in shock—It's Christmastime! And I still needed to get presents! The college bookstore was my friend that year! Somehow I had been so busy with the end of the semester that I'd missed out on getting ready for Christmas! Of course, when I got home, there were the tree and the decorations and Christmas cookies just like always. Aren't parents great?! But for me, I didn't feel ready—I'd been so busy that I had not even looked up, and then boom! It's Christmas! Has that ever happened to you?

Advent is a very countercultural activity. Instead of intensifying the busy-ness, it is about stopping. Stepping aside from the rush. Reflecting. I think that is a very healthy thing to do—stop. Breathe. Reflect. Don't let the busy-ness just sweep you along mindlessly through Christmas. Advent is a time to *consciously* wait and prepare for Jesus to arrive. I think kids get this better than we do. They are waiting for Christmas with eagerness. Excitement. Hope.

We all can have hope at Christmas time too, even in 2020. Hope recognizes that we are looking for *something* to get better. This year *nothing* feels anywhere close to perfect. First Pres, we are called to be people who wait with hope. We can wait with hope. Hope always begins with recognizing that things aren't the way they are supposed to be. If everything was just right, we'd have nothing to hope for. What we are doing in Advent is hoping for Jesus—to encounter him more deeply. But actually I think most of us struggle to give any time to Jesus at all! That's why doing a special Advent practice is a good way to stop, wait and hope. We have

two Advent devotionals available to you, one in the email blast, and one on our website you can download. You can even take a 20 or 30 minute mini-retreat each week to help you get ready for Christmas. We'll have links for that on the website too.

We are waiting for the great end of the Bible story. As we saw a few weeks ago, it is amazing! The end of the story is life with Jesus. Not the helpless baby, not the crucified criminal, but Jesus the triumphant ruler of everything. Jesus coming in love to lead us into the fullness of who we were made to be. That's the reason for our hope!

Still, thinking about the future is scary. In our gospel reading from Mark we hear Jesus talking about the future. Jesus is talking partly about events that would happen in only about 40 years--the destruction of the temple and the sack of Jerusalem in AD 70. But Jesus is also talking in this passage about a different, much later time— the time “following that distress.” This is the end of the whole Bible story, the time when Jesus returns in glory and gathers all his people from all over the world. Jesus says that no one knows when that will happen, except the Father. That means that we do not need to waste our time writing out timetables trying to predict when the end will be. But Jesus repeats over and over that we should keep alert! Stay awake! Jesus calls us to pay attention! He doesn't want us to sleepwalk through life or to go in such a hurry that we don't see what is right in front of us. How do we live with the end in view? Jesus tells us to pay attention! Keep Alert!

I heard someone talking about going to a Texas A&M football game—back in the before times of full stadiums. He noticed something unusual. Everyone in the entire student body stood up the *whole* time! They all stayed standing for the entire game! I went to the University of Michigan, which is a pretty intense football school. At least it was before this season. But we did not stand up ALL the time. Don't be ridiculous! It is different with the Aggies, there everyone always is standing. Why? Apparently decades ago the Aggies team was riddled with injuries one season. It got so bad during one game that they only had 10 guys left who could play—not even the full 11! It looked like they would have to forfeit. Then one of the students jumped out of the stands and ran onto the field and joined the game. In fact, he even ran for a touchdown and the Aggies won! Ever since, Aggie students stand during games—they are all waiting, vigilant, ready to join in. It is an active waiting. Not a lounging on the couch kind of

waiting; but an active, involved, making a difference today kind of waiting. That is what Jesus calls us to also.

Our waiting is different from the waiting of those believers 2000 years ago in one important way. Jesus has come! We *know* that God is keeping his promises, we are just in this in-between time before the great conclusion. We are not alone, wondering if God has abandoned us. No! God's Spirit is with us and we are connected—a church family, the body of Christ. We are empowered by God's Holy Spirit and sent into the world. Even as we pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven, we live each day playing our part in God's rescue mission.

We are waiting but we are not abandoned. Even in a year like this one, even in the midst of loss and pain-- we find ourselves marveling at how God is still at work. Not only is he protecting so many of us, but he is also calling us out into new adventures with him. On Wednesday our Youth spent the morning dropping thanksgiving meals off into people's trunks at the Turkey Toss with Crossroads Urban Center. Many of you have reached out in new ways to connect with neighbors and one another. You even jumped into the deep end and read the whole New Testament together this fall! Over 80 people participated in a church wide Bible study! Jesus loves being with you—in service to others, in prayer, in worship, in caring. Don't miss out! Don't let the disruptions of 2020 distract you from what we are made to do. We are made to love. We were created to love God and care for the people around us.

As we wait in hope, we practice this love that Jesus calls us to. And God reshapes us during the waiting. Our waiting helps us to build intimacy and trust with God, as we recognize our dependence on him.

Finally, our waiting can help us shake off our sense of self importance and our self-imposed hurry. I don't know about you, but I tend to be in a rush a lot of the time. It makes me feel important. But is it good for me? Is it good for the people I'm supposed to be serving? A study was conducted at Princeton Seminary about 30 years ago. The study was on theology students—good Presbyterians at Princeton. They were told to go to another building and give a short talk. One group was told to speak about their motives for studying theology. Another was told to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan. They also told half of the students

that they were late for their talk and told the other half that they had plenty of time. Along their path between the buildings was an actor playing a person who needed help. He was slumped over and obviously in bad shape.

Who was more likely to stop and help? Was it the people thinking about their own motives for becoming a pastor? Or the people thinking about the Good Samaritan story? Actually, there was no difference between those two groups in how many people stopped to help. The content of the speech didn't impact their actions at all. But the study did reveal one significant difference in who stopped to help the hurting man. What made a difference? Whether they thought they had time! Only 10% of the people in a hurry stopped to help, while 60% of those who believed they had time stopped! Being in a rush cut almost everyone off from caring. As Dallas Willard taught—if we want to follow Jesus we must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our life. Ruthlessly eliminate hurry.

Our perpetual busy-ness and hurry cuts us off from the people we could be helping. It separates us from God. It distracts us from the part we are called in play in easing the world's suffering. Jesus calls us to be awake in this moment. Right NOW—not dreaming about the future or rehearsing the past. This life—this hurting, pandemic disrupted, economically uncertain, exhausting life in 2020—*this* is the life Jesus calls us to. Now is the time for us to be alert and to love in hope. It's why we are here!

This Advent we are remembering that we are always waiting for Jesus. We are living in the hope of that last day when we returns and establishes his Kingdom completely. And as we wait he empowers us and gives us all we need to do our part in God's mission until that day. We can keep awake and alert by recognizing the blessings around us in each moment.

This week—slow down. Stay alert! And hold onto hope! Notice the glimpses and flashes of God in your everyday, walking around, going to work lives—that is God with Us. That is the hope we have as we wait with eagerness.

Let's Pray— Dear Lord Jesus—thank you for coming to us. Help us to truly get ready to experience your Advent, your arrival, among us this Christmas. And help us to live aware of the story we are in, and aware of our destiny when you return. Strengthen us and encourage us to

keep alert, to watch and pray. Help us to see each day for the mystery and gift that it is. And open our eyes to the ways you have for us to serve you in each of those days—to help those who need it, to encourage those who are beaten down. To lift up the discouraged. To be present and to love. Open our eyes and help us to use the gifts you have given us for your Glory Lord!

In Jesus' Strong name we ask it. Amen!