

Sunday, November 27, 2011
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Sermon – Keep Awake - Be Ready"

So here we are in Advent.

We have given thanks for the many blessings in our lives, cleaned up the leftover turkey, washed the dishes and it is time to start thinking about Christmas.

Advent – a time of joyful anticipation.

Advent – a time to reflect on our need for a savior.

Advent – a time to prepare the way for the Emmanuel – God with us.

Advent – also a time when people worry about presents, holiday gatherings, financial obligations and year-end responsibilities.

The challenge of Advent is to hold these different perspectives in tension.

To allow yourself the wonder and awe of a miracle, while managing your anxieties.

Anthony Robinson points out that Scripture teaches that such anxious times are times to double-down on faith and courage, times to stand up not shrink down, times to be alert and faithful rather than distracted or alarmed."

Hence the words of warning and encouragement present in today's reading. "Watch out! Stay alert! You don't know when the time is coming."

In all of our readings today we find this combination of threat and assurance.

Threat: don't lose faith, don't be seduced by the world's fears or fantasies;

Promise: God is faithful, God is coming when you least expect it, God will break in among you, and is doing so even now.

Mark's gospel paints a bleak picture

‘But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.’”

These are doomsday predictions, so popular in the media. Wasn't this supposed to come true on 11/11/11?

It didn't.

But what if this period of darkness did arrive?

Would you be ready?

Is everything just as you would want it to be?

Advent is the time to take stock and see if you are ready.

We celebrate Advent and Christmas as if it is a commemorative holiday, marking the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ.

We spend a lot of time preparing – for guests, for festivities, for vacation, for presents – what if we spent all of that time preparing our hearts for Jesus Christ?

What if we decided to mark Advent and Christmas with the anticipation that Jesus Christ was indeed coming into our lives—literally right into our midst, in just a few short weeks?

What if we heeded Mark’s call to be alert, to watch, to anticipate the coming of the King?

What would you need to do to get ready?

What does this mean in our day to day lives?

It means that we must take time, each and every day, to place ourselves in God’s presence.

We must make a concerted effort to resist the craziness of the preChristmas season and to develop the discipline to remind ourselves that this is all about the birth of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Prince of Peace, Savior.

We must live our lives as the disciples of the early church did – in joyful anticipation of the return of Christ.

Henri Nouwen talks of this waiting as a way of life. He says,

“If we do not wait patiently in expectation for God's coming in glory, we start wandering around, going from one little sensation to another. Our lives get stuffed with newspaper items, television stories, and gossip. Then our minds lose the discipline of discerning between what leads us closer to God and what doesn't, and our hearts gradually lose their spiritual sensitivity.

Without waiting for the second coming of Christ, we will stagnate quickly and become tempted to indulge in whatever gives us a moment of pleasure.”

What are the distractions in your life? What causes you to “wander around” in the world, without clear direction?

I believe that we are created with a yearning for God.

All of our actions, from the time we are born until our death, are motivated toward that oneness.

We have an emptiness that is to be filled, or fulfilled, with God’s presence.

What happens is that we fill up that emptiness with a lot of different things.

Sometimes we fill it with material possessions.

Sometimes we fill it with food or alcohol.

Sometimes we fill in with envy and jealousy.

Sometimes we fill it with work.

Sometimes we fill it with hate.

But, when we make a choice – a deliberate, conscious choice – to fill that emptiness with God - our restlessness is calmed.

Our wandering comes to an end.

We center ourselves on the one, who is greater and more powerful than we can imagine.

We find peace.

Today we lit the candle of hope on the advent wreath.

Hope is the shawl that we wrap around ourselves on this journey.

Advent hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, but fulfilled according to the promises God has made, not just our own wishes.

Advent hope is an open-ended waiting that allows us to give up control over our future and let God define our life—trusting that God molds us according to God’s love.

Isaiah’s beautiful words ring true, “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;

we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

When we have hope, we believe that all is well. Not a “Pollyanna” naïve belief, but a deep-seated knowledge that we belong to God.

As Christians, we wait in community.

We gather to remind ourselves what we are waiting for.

We come together to encourage one another to resist the temptations that face us in our day to day lives.

We are here to nurture hope, to celebrate the promise of what is to come.

We are here because we know that Jesus Christ came and walked among us and that he will come again.

We come here to get ready.

So make a plan.

Decide what you are going to do this Advent to get ready.

Figure out the best way for you to watch the door as you wait patiently for the arrival of the one who saves: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Prince of Peace, Savior.

We sang O Come, O Come Emmanuel – such a familiar hymn.

I want you to let the words find their way into your hearts this Advent.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel – Emmanuel, God with us, God in us.

Let this be the refrain that repeats itself in your brain this holiday season.

As you attend to your responsibilities – both real and imagined – call on God to take residence in your heart.

Allow yourself to move toward oneness with our Creator.

Make room for the miracle of Jesus Christ.