

Advent 1, Year C
Nov. 29, 2009
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"Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

In the name of the one God, who was and is and is to come. Amen.

As we begin yet another Advent season, another beginning of the cycle of the Christian year, I remember the ritual my family always participated in during our nightly dinners during this season. The table was set as usual, with the addition of the Advent wreath, a box of matches, a candle snuffer, and a Book of Common Prayer. We ate dinner all together at the table back then - almost always at 6:00 - always at the same place at the table. But before we could start eating, we had our family Advent service.

The five of us would be sitting around the table together, well past the moment when the last bit of daylight becomes the dark night of winter. We -- the 3 children -- were all acolyte wanna-be's, arguing over whose turn it was to light the candles of the Advent wreath, and after dinner, whose turn it was to put them out with the little silver candle snuffer. But someone lit the right number of purple candles on the wreath and my father would read the Collect for the Day. The one I can still hear in his soothing, deep voice is today's collect because it is the first one: "Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility."

We sat still while he read, watching the candlelight flickering, waiting for the first bit of wax to drip over the side of the candle, smelling the fragrance of the

greenery my mother had wired onto the thin brass circle that held the four purple candles. When Daddy finished the collect, we would sing a verse of 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel,' feeling wistful even though we weren't sure why. It was a solemn time, a magic time.

Even now those words have a certain melancholy, a certain longing to them, as we prepare for the coming of the Christ Child. But the lessons appointed for today, the first Sunday of Advent, don't point to the nativity at all; instead, they focus on the Second Coming. "Be on guard! Be alert at all times!" Luke tells us. The day of the Lord is near, and though we cannot know the day or the hour, we must be ready.

As I wrote these first words, it dawned on me that 1) I think I tell this story about our dinner table ritual every Advent when I preach on the first Sunday and 2) I am a church nerd! I know that won't come as much of a surprise to most of you, but let me explain why I am a church nerd: I love church! I grew up, literally, in the church. My second birthday party happened during children's choir practice. I know that my birthday is always in Lent and can never be Easter Sunday - because I also know that the earliest date Easter can be is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox - which means one day after my birthday. I know that the fourth Sunday of Advent is always "Mary Sunday," when we hear the story of Gabriel and Mary and the Magnificat, and that the fourth Sunday of Easter is always "Shepherd Sunday," when the lessons are about Jesus being the good shepherd of his sheep.

Growing up in the church has also made me a church nerd because I measure time according to the liturgical calendar - today is New Year's Day for church nerds -

the first Sunday of the church calendar. I measure my time, not by football and hunting seasons, or by school semesters and vacations, but by Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost - a calendar that has a rhythm all its own. In our culture we spend time, manage it, save it, waste it, make it and lose it. We even take away an hour and then put it back months later!

But in church, we're in God's time, and things are different, especially in Advent. As people of God, we live in between the now and the not yet, which is especially clear in the Advent season. While we spend 99.9% of our time thinking about and anticipating the birth of a child who has already been born, we spend half of the Sundays in Advent talking about the end of time, the date and time of which we cannot know. And so, while we are being told to keep watch and to be alert, we are also being told to wait! Just wait. Yeah, right.

We know that our culture is does not like waiting. We don't like to wait in line. We use debit cards because we don't want people behind us to be impatient while we write checks. We rack up credit card debt because we don't want to wait to save the money for something we want. We yell at our computers when they are 'too slow'. We blow our car horns when people in front of us don't make a fast enough start when the traffic light turns green.

Despite the fact that we don't like to wait, we have to wait a lot, and some of us get to be good at it. We wait for God to hear our prayers for someone who is very ill. We wait for peace - forever, it seems. We wait and wait and wait. And while we are waiting, we can approach it a couple of ways: we can sit back and expect whatever we are waiting for to be delivered to us, or we can work while we wait -

work to help bring about God's kingdom. We do that by speaking words of hope and promise to a world often filled with fear and uncertainty, even despair.

Especially in this season of Advent, we must speak words of hope. We must tell the world that in the midst of darkness, light is about to break in. In the midst of despair, hope will erupt. After long waiting, a branch will sprout. The complete fulfillment of God's promises has not yet happened, but it is coming. So amid the very real setbacks, disappointments, or worries of this life, we can "stand up and raise [our] heads" because we have heard Jesus' promise that our "redemption draws near." Such is Advent faith, and Advent hope.

There is an anthem that the choir will sing soon - I am trying to wait patiently for the Sunday when they sing it - that says a lot about the in-between-ness of Advent, of waiting, of hoping, of working to spread that hope, of the fulfillment of the hope. It is called "E'en so, Lord Jesus, quickly come:"

Peace be to you and grace from Him
Who freed us from our sins,
Who loved us all and shed His blood
That we might saved be.

Sing Holy, Holy to our Lord,
The Lord, Almighty God,
Who was and is and is to come;
Sing Holy, Holy Lord!

Rejoice in heaven, all ye that dwell therein,
Rejoice on earth, ye saints below,
For Christ is coming, is coming soon,
For Christ is coming soon!

E'en so, Lord Jesus, quickly come,
And night shall be no more;
They need no light nor lamp nor sun,
For Christ will be their All!

Here, this morning, at this banquet table where there is room for everyone, let us find our hope in the God who made us and set us free. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.