

Sunday, December 2, 2018
First Sunday of Advent (Year C)
1 Thessalonians 3.9-13; Luke 21.25.36
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“Be alert at all times.” As we begin our journey into Advent, these words of Jesus in today’s Gospel serve as a watchword for how we are to enter into this holy season. This command to “be alert at all times” carries with it a sense of expectation and anticipation that something is definitely going to happen. Maybe even something that calls for preparation on our part. But the question is, how to prepare?

These themes of expectation, anticipation, and preparation are central to the season of Advent. Advent is the anglicized version of the Latin *adventus*, which means “coming.” We commonly think of Advent as a time of preparation for the coming of Christmas, as a time of expectation and anticipation of, the time of preparation for, the birth of Jesus just four weeks from now. But Advent is actually so much more. Jesus’ birth is only a part of this “coming” to which Advent refers. Advent also refers to the expected coming of Jesus at the end of the ages – what we commonly call the Second Coming. As we begin our Advent journey, it is his Second Coming that Jesus specifically addresses in today’s Gospel—when we will “see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory” (Lk 21.27). This will mark the end times, when the Kingdom of God is brought into its fullness. In this sense, Advent, or at least part of the meaning of Advent, is about anticipating and preparing for the long expected Kingdom of God. It is about the fullness of our salvation being realized. It is this coming that is central to who we are as children of God.

In the early days of the Church, the greatest anticipation, the greatest expectation, the thing for which Christians sought to prepare for, was the coming again of our Lord. It was only around the fifth century that the Church really began to celebrate Advent as the time of anticipation of the birth of Jesus at Christmas. Perhaps it was because the end of the ages and the associated Second Coming of Christ were obviously taking longer than originally expected – longer than seemed to be implied by Jesus himself. As a result, the Church began to rethink how it did things and settled in for the long haul. The Church finally realized that when Jesus said no one knows the day or the hour of his return, he meant it. And so, for whatever reason that is lost to antiquity, anticipation and preparation for Jesus’ birth was added to the mix. And thus, Advent took on a second meaning.

In this way, Advent became focused on two points in time. The coming of Jesus at his birth and the coming of Jesus at the end of the ages—two bookend events marking the complete span of the Christian Era. And so in this season of Advent we respond at the same time to both events, in the coming of Jesus’ birth and his coming at the end of the ages, with a sense of expectation, a sense of anticipation, a need for preparation.

Perhaps because of this shift, with the anticipation and preparation for Christmas being added to the mix, the journey through Advent took on what seems to be a strange trajectory. As we look at the events and associated themes addressed in Advent, as we look at the progression of Scripture readings during this season, we appear to take a chaotic and confusing journey

through time. We begin on the first week of Advent by looking at the expected end of the ages, where we jump from the present to some point in the future—when, we do not know. From there, we then slingshot backward. In the second week of Advent, we meet John the Baptist—“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’” (Lk 3.4). In the third week of Advent, we move ahead in John’s life and ministry, as we hear him preach a message of repentance, symbolized by baptism. And then in the fourth week, we are again propelled from John’s adulthood backwards in time to the meeting between Elizabeth pregnant with John the Baptist and Mary pregnant with Jesus, whereupon meeting, the unborn John leaps for joy. Even in the womb, John proclaims exultation at the nearness of the coming of the Messiah into the world. The coming that will happen some months later for them, but just days later for us, as we move from Advent into Christmas, with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. This journey through Advent seems to provide a “how did we get here” feel. A retrospective, except it is really told in reverse, in fits and starts.

From this Advent journey through salvation history, we see that the birth is not the end point of the story of our faith and our salvation. It is just the beginning. For the birth of a child leads to a life and ministry dedicated to one purpose—leading to the ultimate event of human history, of salvation history. The Second Coming is that ultimate event. The whole reason for the event we witness at the manger in Bethlehem—the promise for which we are called to wait. The promise of salvation and eternal life. In this sense, the Advent journey is not just one that goes backwards in time from the Second Coming to the First Coming, but is rather one that continually loops back on itself, with the Second Coming predicated upon and pointing back to the birth event, and the birth event predicated upon and pointing ahead to the Second Coming. Such is God’s plan for our salvation.

Advent, therefore, is not just about the two end points, but also about what occurs between. It is what occurs in between that holds the two together in a dynamic tension. Looking through the arc of Advent, we recognize it is divine promise that binds the two. A promise we continue to wait upon in faith and in hope. The promise of a birth that itself carries the promise of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. A promise that is made to us and for us. The promise of salvation that comes through the promise of the birth of a child.

As such, Advent is not just about waiting for the birth of a child. It is not about just waiting for the Second Coming. In a broader sense, it is a time to consider how God comes into our lives in between these two events. Not just how he came in the form of a child. Not just how he will come at the end of the ages. But how he continues to come into our lives, not just during this Advent season, but at all times of our lives. Advent seeks to explore our longing for the many and often surprising ways God comes to us, making himself known to us in tangible ways. And to recognize the ways God comes to us in the most ordinary and mundane events in our lives.

On this first Sunday of Advent, we begin a new liturgical year. This particular year is centered on the Gospel According to Luke. The story in Luke and the Acts of the Apostles (which is really just a continuation of Luke) is a response to the question of the early Church about the timing and nature of salvation, answered by illustrating the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. All of which, of course, begin with his birth. All of which will ultimately be revealed and brought to

fruition in his promised Second Coming. This season of Advent provides an overarching view responding to that question.

Most important to that response is our faithfulness. In our reading from First Thessalonians, Paul urges our faithfulness until Christ's return. Our whole life's journey is about seeking to maintain faithfulness. Our Advent journey is symbolic of those intentions. It is a time when we intentionally seek the ways God breaks into our lives in spectacular ways and in ordinary ways. To be open to seeing just how that is happening, when that is happening.

"Be alert at all times." Because Jesus breaks into our lives in a variety of ways, at any possible time, often when we least expect it. Our weekly worship, not only during Advent, but throughout the year, provides a framework for how we recognize those times. A framework for how we respond to those times. For every time we gather together, we seek to encounter our Lord. For our Lord comes to us every time we gather. He comes to us in word—in the words of scripture, in the words of our prayers. He comes to us in music. He comes to us in the passing of the peace. He comes to us in a holy meal, offering his body and his blood, given for us.

As we begin this Advent season, let this holy time set the stage not just for the joyous celebration of the birth of our Lord at Christmas, but also for what follows. There's a reason Jesus commands us to be alert. "Be alert at all times" holds a sense of promise. Be alert because something is definitely going to happen. We know that a child was born. Not any child, but the Son of God. The child grew into a man. Not just any man, but the Messiah. He preached a message that changed the world. He performed miracles, healed the sick, cared for the marginalized. He was crucified. He was raised from the dead. In so doing, he defeated sin and death. For us. To give us eternal life. And we know, by his own promise, he will come again. So rest assured. In between, while we wait in the time between Jesus' birth and his Second Coming, even more is bound to happen—and you don't want to miss it. So, "be alert at all times." Because, for now, being alert just may be preparation enough.