

**Sunday, November 28, 2021**  
**First Sunday of Advent (Year C)**  
1 Thessalonians 3.9-13; Luke 21.25-36

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/580033453075657>

*(Sermon begins at about 17:40)*

**“Advent as a Way of Life”**

Today we begin a new liturgical year with the start of our four-week journey through Advent. Our preparation for the coming of Christ. Since Advent ends with the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child at Christmas, we naturally tend to view Advent as the season of preparation for Christmas. Which it is. But Advent is about so much more than just preparing for Christmas. As we discuss every year, Advent is about preparing for the coming of Christ in multiple contexts. As we’ve already established, the coming of Christ at his birth in Bethlehem on Christmas. The other context is the coming of Christ at the end of the ages. What we refer to as the Second Coming. When it comes to our scripture readings for this season, it is actually not Christmas, but the anticipated Second Coming of Christ, which gets the most airtime during Advent. Out of the Gospel readings for each of the Sundays of Advent, only one actually deals with the anticipated birth of Jesus. Coming on the fourth Sunday of Advent, this year with the story of Mary’s visitation to her cousin Elizabeth, and the unborn John the Baptist leaping for joy in Elizabeth’s womb at the presence of the coming Lord.

The Gospels for the first three Sundays of Advent all deal with the topic of Jesus’ Second Coming. Either directly or indirectly. Our Gospel for today certainly deals with the anticipation of the end of the ages. With what Jesus refers to as the coming of the Son of Man—an oft used reference to himself, particularly in this future context. An appropriate way to wrap up what, in Luke, is Jesus’ final teaching session with his disciples before his passion. In the run-up to today’s passage, Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem itself. He foretells a time of great suffering. Then, in the portion we heard today, he draws upon imagery from the Old Testament apocalyptic literature, which points to signs of the coming of the Son of Man, of the Messiah. That with the coming of the Son of Man, whenever that happens, there will be redemption. God will set all things right.

The Gospels for the other two Sundays of Advent deal with the subject of Jesus’ baptism. Next week we are introduced to John the Baptist, who points the way to the coming Messiah. And the following week, we have the prelude to Jesus’ baptism, although we do not actually hear about that event. These events obviously having an eye not on the birth of Jesus since he has already been born, but rather on who he will become. Both of these accounts with John the Baptist set the stage for the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, where he will grow into the fullness of who he is called to be as the Messiah. Taking him from his baptism in the River Jordan to his crucifixion in Jerusalem. And on to the realization of him actually being the Messiah through his Resurrection. Itself setting the stage for the eventual Second Coming. For his return as the Messiah who will finally redeem and liberate his people and usher in a new age.

So, from a Biblical perspective, the season of Advent, while serving as preparation and anticipation for the annual celebration of Christmas, actually has little to say about that particular event. Which is actually consistent with the early church, which was far more focused on Jesus' Second Coming, which they thought would occur at any moment. In fact, the first recorded celebration of Christmas did not happen until 336. A full three centuries after Jesus' death.

If anything, Advent provides the context for why Christmas is important. Laying out the explanation for the endgame, for what Jesus as Messiah will ultimately accomplish through his life, through his death and Resurrection, and through what comes after that. Our tendency to focus more on Christmas as opposed to the Second Coming is probably two-fold. First is likely just human nature. It's more fun to focus on Christmas than the end of the ages. More fun to focus on the birth of Jesus as opposed to a time of final judgment. And second, I'm guessing our cultural focus on preparation for Christmas, "officially" beginning with Thanksgiving and coinciding with the religious season of Advent, contributes to our focus more on Christmas than on the themes for the other three weeks of Advent. Resulting in the focus on the longer-term, future orientation of Advent being downplayed.

Not to dismiss the importance of preparing for Christmas and how Advent helps with that. But given the weight of the Gospel themes for this season, Advent is even more about our long-term anticipation and preparation for the end of the ages. For the time when we will be called to make an account of our life. To provide an account of how we sought to live as fully as possible into who God created us to be. To provide an account of how we lived into God's commandments. To provide an account of how we truly lived into being the Body of Christ in the world between the time of his first coming and the time of his Second Coming. If anything, to demonstrate how the birth of Jesus and what follows from that event impacts our own individual lives of faith.

Despite the way we tend to gloss over the breadth of what Advent means, our anticipation is not meant to be passive. We are not meant to just sit around twiddling our thumbs. Jesus is very clear in today's Gospel account what we are to do. The tagline for what Advent is about, according to Jesus himself, is "be alert." Being alert implies an active participation in the situation. Jesus does not say in today's Gospel specifically what that action looks like. But given the fact that he is speaking to his disciples mere days before his death, this final teaching constitutes his farewell discourse to them—his final message to prepare them for what is to follow. And that is essentially that they are to continue with the ministry he began. With proclaiming the Good News in word and action. After three years, there was no need to go into detail. They knew what they needed to do. And as his followers, as inheritors of his ministry from those who have gone before, we know what it means to be alert. We are to be alert to seeing where we can proclaim the Gospel in our own lives. How we can share the Good News of God's love. How we can demonstrate that love in tangible ways. Being alert means being attentive to possibilities for ministry and then actually doing it.

Lutheran theologian Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt provides insight into what being alert means. He writes, "This is a most important assignment. If we fulfill this task – to watch for

Christ's coming – we will find it becoming reality now. When we keep watch, our whole being is directed toward this future. We see it before our eyes, we feel it in our whole life. We cannot be swallowed up by the present, for we are linked to the future; we experience this future already. Our life is renewed again and again and something new develops, something that points the way for us to go: each time it is a glimpse into Jesus Christ's future" (Daily Dig email, Plough, 11/22/21). In other words, our being alert, our own actions, help in the building of the Kingdom that Jesus will eventually bring to completion with his Second Coming. Our actions, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, contribute to the ultimate goal of building the Kingdom.

That being the case, our Advent work of preparing for Christ's coming is not something that we only do during the Advent season, Jesus is explicit about his expectation for us. He does not say "you only have to be alert during the season of Advent." He does not say, "you only have to be alert until Christmas." As Jesus commands, "Be alert at all times." Not just during the season of Advent, but at all times. Being alert is a way of living. Being attentive to how we can continually seek to live into the vision of the Kingdom of God here and now. Being attentive to how we continually seek to love God and love our neighbors at all times. With every fiber of our being. In this respect, Advent is not so much a season as a way of being. It is not just a four-week period of anticipating and preparing, but a life-long process. This is Paul's message to the church in Thessalonica, recorded in our New Testament reading for today: "may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thess 3.12-13). Words that are no less true today than they were nearly 2,000 years ago.

Advent is about two things. The coming of Jesus at his birth, which has already occurred in history. And the Second Coming of Jesus at the end of the ages, which has yet to occur. We can have a joyous celebration of the first, since it forms the foundation of all that follows. But as to the Second Coming, that has yet to be determined. Our parts are not yet written. Although we do have a say in how that part of the story will turn out. The season of Advent is a gentle annual reminder that there is more to the story. The story we are participating in as we move through Advent. The story we celebrate at Christmas. But more importantly, the story we live every day of our lives. In this, Advent is not just a season. It is a way of life.