

Sunday, November 27, 2022
First Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Matthew 24.36-44

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Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/499123878844202>

(Sermon begins at about 17:20)

“The Place of Advent”

Happy New Year!

Yes, it's the beginning of Advent and therefore, the beginning of a new year, at least as far as the Christian Church is concerned. Time to restart our annual liturgical calendar and reset our cycle of lectionary readings. Time to reset our intention as to what it means to live a life of faith in the One whose coming we celebrate this season and throughout the year.

But I have one question: Why Advent as the beginning of the Church year? Why not January 1st to coincide with the secular calendar? Why not Christmas to coincide with the birth of our Lord, the One who ushers in a new era? Why not Easter to coincide with the resurrection and the promise of new and eternal life, really ushering in a new era? Why not Pentecost to coincide with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the Church? Of all the choices available for marking the passage of time and for demarcating a new beginning, there are certainly plenty of choices. But Advent? There's nothing particularly notable about Advent. It is not as much an event as it is a time of anticipation and preparation for actual events. Not to mention that, unlike Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, which are specific events that could actually be marked on a calendar (the actual date of Christmas notwithstanding), Advent is essentially just a made-up season. Although that little fact does not make Advent any the less valid. After all, the Church came up with Advent for very good reasons.

To be honest, the history of Advent is uncertain. While we do not know when Advent started as a liturgical season, or what specifically caused the advent of Advent, we do know that it was certainly in existence by the late fifth century. While Advent ends with Christmas Eve, the starting date and hence its duration has varied throughout history and by location. Even the particular customs associated with Advent, most notably regarding fasting, have varied throughout history. In fact, there was even inconsistency over time and across geography as to whether Advent was even commemorated at all. Given its history, it's a wonder that Advent coalesced into what we know today. Nonetheless, Advent is now obviously part of the standard Christian liturgical schema and, at least in Western Christianity, is considered the beginning of the liturgical year.

So, given what we know—or don't know—history is not going to help us determine why Advent became the de facto start of the Church year. So, maybe the “why” of Advent will help—the reason we celebrate Advent in the first place. Of course, we know the reason for Advent. It is a time of preparation, not unlike Lent. In fact, Advent has sometimes been likened to a shorter, less-penitential, less-austere, version of Lent. Unlike Lent, which is a time of preparation for a

single event—Easter—Advent is a time of preparation for several events. These are reflected in the themes of the scripture readings for the season.

In the broadest sense, Advent is a season of expectant anticipation and preparation for the coming of our Lord into the world. Falling when it does, we naturally think of this as the birth of the baby Jesus on Christmas. But Advent is not just about preparing for the birth of the Christ child. Traditionally, the season of Advent anticipates the coming of Christ in two different ways. First, we have the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, which we recognize as being fulfilled through the birth of Jesus. And second, we anticipate his Second Coming at the end of the ages. In a broader sense, Advent is really about the coming of Jesus Christ into our midst in a variety of ways. Not just in these two events, but in ongoing ways.

As I noted, this time of preparation did not become an established part of the Church for a good four to five hundred years. So why the abrupt change to add a time of preparation for the coming of the Lord when there had not been a perceived need before? We have to remember that the early Church thought Jesus was going to return at any moment. Jesus says as much just after he foretells his own death and resurrection: “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Mt 16.27-28). Following his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus’ followers thought he would come back at any time. And reasonably so. Although, as we know, Jesus did not return right away, and certainly not in the lifetime of any who heard those original words. And we still wait for his return.

Perhaps, as more and more time passed with no Second Coming, people grew a little more lackadaisical, even sloppy, in following the Gospel teachings, particularly like the one we heard today: “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming . . . Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Mt 24. 42, 44). After four to five centuries, you can see why the people might have developed an attitude of “Yeah, right! Why bother?” And why the Church needed to take corrective action. To set aside a time to intentionally focus on the subject of preparation for the Second Coming. To help the people get back on track in their lives of faith.

Again, we do not know the specific process or deliberations that occurred. Although given the varied nature of the timing and practices, Advent seemed to have initially been more of a local, grassroots development as opposed to being imposed from on high. With the practice spreading throughout the Church and becoming normalized over time. But one of the considerations would have been, when in the liturgical calendar to place this new thing called Advent. When in the Church calendar to focus on preparation for the Second Coming. Particularly since the Second Coming is a key part of our religion and contingent upon or reflected in all other commemorations. Looking at the liturgical calendar shows that there is not a lot of empty space. You have Christmas, followed by Epiphany, followed by Lent, followed by Easter, followed by Pentecost. That only leaves the latter part of the calendar year. The time leading up to . . . you guessed it . . . Christmas.

Christmas, the first coming of Jesus at his birth in Bethlehem. What better time to focus on preparation for the Second Coming of Christ than during the run up to the annual celebration of his first coming. After all, you can't really have the Second Coming until you have the first one. And when you think about it, it all is really of a piece. God's plan for salvation history to send his Son to be among us, born in human form. With the intent that the life and ministry, and the death and resurrection of his Son would provide for our forgiveness and for our eternal life. Eternal life that would be heralded in the event of the return of his Son—the Second Coming. The birth of Jesus, beginning his life and ministry, leading to his death and resurrection, ultimately leading to his Second Coming. It all is one continuous story punctuated by particular experiences of Jesus' coming among us—one that has already happened at his birth and one that we continue to await and anticipate.

Tying the two advents of Jesus together is another experience of the coming of Christ in our midst. The experience of Jesus' followers as they anticipate and prepare for the annual celebration of the first event and the eventuality of the second. Our ongoing experiences of the coming of Jesus into our lives, not just at this time of year, but on a daily basis. How we live our lives and how we engage in our ongoing preparations for the endgame, for the ultimate goal of God's divine plan for humanity's salvation. And ultimately, for the importance, even the urgency, for ongoing anticipation and preparation.

We get a sense of this in our lectionary readings for this first Sunday of Advent, where we start with the focus on the Second Coming. "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mt 24.36). Jesus then cites the days of Noah, when something earth-shattering was about to happen and the vast majority of humanity—all except Noah, who was busy preparing—was oblivious to what was about to happen and to the need for any sort of preparation at all. Jesus then cites various examples of people going about their day-to-day lives. By distinguishing between those who are taken and those who are left behind, he is lifting up the need for preparation. Using these examples implies that our preparations must occur in the context of our daily lives. But note, he does not give any specifics. He does not say you have to do X, Y, and Z. All he says is "Keep awake."

I think this was just a gentle reminder. Jesus did not feel the need to go into much detail. He did not feel the need to give too many instructions—other than the one. Because that one instruction—"Keep awake"—implies that Jesus' followers already know what they need to do. That they are to follow the example that he provided for them. They are to live the Gospel message in word and action, as he had directed them and shown them in his own life and ministry. Implying that they were already prepared by virtue of following the Gospel. And so are we. If we are truly living as Christ calls us, if we are truly living according to his commandments, already living into the fullness of who God has created and calls us to be, we are already prepared. No need to rush and try to get it all done in the span of four weeks.

But even more so, if we are living as God and Jesus call us to, Advent is not just the four weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Advent is our way of life. A life of anticipation for the coming of our Lord—at Christmas and at the end of the ages and every day in between, as he continually makes himself known in our lives. As we continually make him known through our words and actions, through our mission and ministry.

Which takes us back to my initial question: Why is Advent the beginning of the Church year? Because all that we do in our lives of faith, all we do in the Church, is about anticipation and preparation for the coming of Christ into our lives. At his birth 2,000 years ago. At some point in the future—when we do not know. And at every moment in between. As we move through our lives, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus through our words and actions. And as we move through the liturgical year, celebrating and commemorating all the major events in the life of Christ and the life of the Church, leading to the promise of eternal life. And at the center of it all, the beginning of it all—well, after Jesus, of course—is us. The people of God. The Body of Christ. And our anticipation of, our preparation for, our participation in, the unfolding of salvation history.

Happy New Year, and a Blessed Advent journey—through the next four weeks and throughout our waiting for Christ’s return in glory.