

December 2, 2007

Advent 1 Year A

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

I must confess to you that I'm sort of giddy as I stand here today because I love Advent. It really is my favorite season of the Church year! As a child it was high on the list because my family did the Advent calendar thing and my Advent calendar always had chocolate pieces in it. As I look back, I think ours was more like a December calendar since I started opening the little doors of my calendar on December 1st rather than whatever the first day of Advent was...at any rate, it served the purpose of getting me ready for Christmas, one chocolate treat at a time. This was our family ritual, practiced every day after I got home from school or came inside from playing, so in some ways I learned very early the art of hopeful waiting that Advent represents. What I was waiting for, though, was not the long anticipated messiah, but rather a very different kind of salvation, one that came in the form of bicycles, baby dolls and a Barbie town house and whose staying power hardly went farther than February, when my birthday rolled around and I was sure to rake in the presents yet again.

For many, this is what the season of Advent signals... the time to give and get as much as we possibly can of that which we can't possibly need. Even those of us who hold Christmas as sacred because it marks the birth of Jesus Christ almost can't help but get caught up in the frenzy of this month. We celebrate Advent on Sunday, but Monday-Saturday it is merely the pre-Christmas season. You might be thinking "Advent is the pre-Christmas season so why make the distinction?", and to an extent I agree with you. But I also believe that once we make the jump and call these next four weeks pre-Christmas, we have already in a sense dived right into the middle of that next season, and when we do this, we miss the gifts that Advent itself offers and cheat ourselves of a more complete experience of Christmas.

It's kind of like Thanksgiving day (we remember this fairly well, yes? It wasn't that long ago... And please excuse me if I trample on anyone's time honored family traditions with this analogy!)) when the big meal is scheduled to be served at 4pm... there are so many wonderful offerings that you just can't wait to taste but 4pm is a long time away and you are very hungry... so you go get a small snack, bringing it out to share with your other hungry friends and family members, and end up eating a box of crackers and an entire plate of cheese... Then when 4pm rolls around it doesn't matter how good the food looks, you have already eaten and so you can't enjoy...you have, as your mother told you never to do, spoiled your dinner.

But what if instead of eating an entire box of crackers and a whole cheese plate you had simply sampled the relish tray, that small plate of things like celery, pickles, and olives so as to take the edge off your hunger but not completely satiate it...that way, when it is 4pm, you are able to enjoy the bounty for all it is worth because you waited.

We are not a people who like to wait. I'll be the first to admit that most of the time, I am not for waiting. But maybe what I love the best about the season of

Advent is that it is the time where we lift up the joys of waiting, where anticipation and holding our breath is what we are all about, where we are content to stand in an in-between time.

For in Advent we are in a liminal space where we stand in the doorway between Ordinary Time and Christmas, not quite in one room nor the next. This in-between time is a hard place to be, one that requires much patience, one that might tempt us to look for dark places to hide our feelings of fear and doubt rather than stand firmly in the light of courage and hope. It is a hard place, but a holy place, where waiting is not fruitless but rather ripe with the possibility of newness.

To encourage us in this in-between time, we hear the ancient stories read because they are mystical and somewhat other-worldly, pointing toward a future that we can just barely make out in the distance. It is there, but blurry, fuzzy- it appears to be the fulfillment of a promise offered so long ago that we have trouble remembering that it was given and it looks so very different from where we live now...but it is there, shining in the distance, calling us to wait for it to arrive, because the God who keep promises has told us time and again that it will.

When we do this, we can take our place in the line of the saints who have gone before us, also practicing this experience of hopeful waiting...we are like the Israelites, longing for the day when the mountain of the Lord's house shall be raised higher than everything else and stand as a beacon drawing all people to it... we are like the early Christians in Rome, hearing from Paul that the coming of Christ has ushered in a new kind of time and we need to live like that's true... we are like the members of Matthew's community wrestling with what it means to be on the lookout for Jesus' return... and so we are drawn out of ourselves and our sense of being bound to this world into a place where we are transformed and all things are possible.

And all things are possible, including waiting! But the ability to wait doesn't just happen because we want it to. Rather, there are ways of living that make us able to do it. So what are those ways? Well, I offer to you a few suggestions- based simply on a parousal of the church website and conversations with other friends of mine who are committed to honoring Advent as a season in itself rather than merely a pre-cursor to something else that is more familiar and more widely embraced by the world around us.

You might attend a Wednesday Eucharist or a Sunday night service. You could participate in a Christian education class or take on a different outreach project than the ones you usually do. You could make your way through a book of Advent meditations, commit to reading a passage of scripture each day. Or don't put up your Christmas lights yet, keep the baby Jesus out of the manger and explain to your children why you do that, limit your number of holiday parties, make and decorate Christmas cookies but don't eat them (I know that's a hard one!)...there are endless possibilities! But don't do all of these things! For even spiritual disciplines, if we take on too many at once, can become something we are a slave to rather than something that moves us into the freedom we long for.

One of the things I commit to every year is praying the hours using this book by Phyllis Tickle. (hold up the book) It lives on the bookshelf in my living room

and sometimes when I see it I long for it to be the time when committing to using it seems strangely easier. When Advent finally gets here, I know that I have a trusted friend to guide me through the process of holy waiting and I am glad.

If we do some of these things might we form a discipline that lasts past December 25? Better yet, might we emerge from this Advent season not only prepared to receive the Christ child but also ready to live as though his coming matters for more than four weeks out of the year? My bet is yes, to both questions. So will you join me in this commitment? Will you wait with me in this holy doorway so when it is time to pass into the next room we can rejoice together and stand in awe at what we see?

Let us pray: Holy God, Change all our insensitive habits and help us to do better during this Advent. Make us so sensitive to your immediate comings in the ups and downs of each ordinary day that we shall be well prepared to welcome your Christmas Coming as a consummation of love and joy. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.