

First Sunday in Advent • December 3, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Mark 13:24-37

“Anticipation”

This sermon might have the best ending that you've ever heard.

Back when I was growing up, my family would have a day – usually after Thanksgiving – when we'd set up all the Christmas decorations around the house. Step one was putting up the Christmas tree. Sometimes we'd get a real tree, but I think my parents ultimately decided that a quality artificial tree from an after-Christmas sale was the best long-term investment. Once that was set, we opened up the boxes and boxes of ornaments and garlands and nativity sets and Christmas knickknacks that my mom carefully packed away each year, putting them all in their designated spots. Christmas music would play throughout the house as we moved from room, going about our work. And finally, everything was set. The house was transformed. We were ready for Christmas to come.

Over the weeks that followed, I'd watch as gifts showed up under the tree. Sitting there in the evenings, with the tree lit and all other lights down low, I'd imagine what was hidden behind all that wrapping paper. Like many kids, I'd occasionally shake boxes – just a little – to see if I could guess what was waiting inside before their grand opening on Christmas morning. I remember some years where my parents did such a good job with the wrapping that I didn't have a clue what the gift might be. I was both frustrated and excited, wondering about what was coming. Have you ever felt such anticipation?

This one time, I... Nah, you probably don't want to hear about that.

Anticipation can be a welcome sensation, especially in a time and place when so much is available to us on-demand. Having to wait for something to arrive, or looking forward to something that can't or won't happen just yet is a real change of pace for many of us.

There's a flip side to anticipation, though: dread. You might know that something is coming, at some point in the future, but this is something you'd rather get lost along its way. People dread that which brings worry, concern, fear, pain, sadness – bad stuff. In these days of swift medical testing and 24/7 on-demand news briefings, you don't have to search very far to find bad stuff to dread. Wars and rumors of wars seem almost commonplace. You might look for signs of things to come, but will they just bring more to dread?

Our Gospel text from Mark 13 might seem a little odd for the new season of Advent which begins today. Here, Jesus is with his disciples in the days before he was delivered up to his suffering and death, speaking to them about the end times, tribulation, and judgment. He's telling them to stay alert and be ready. He uses the fig tree as an illustration. With Passover near, the fig trees around Jerusalem would probably had leaves just starting to shoot out from their branches. They could see the sign and know what's coming, anticipating summer and everything that came with it.

To what are you looking ahead? In these days at the start of the time of Advent, you might be thinking about how to get ready for Christmas and everything that comes with it. Advent is indeed a time of preparation for Christmas, when we remember that God Himself set aside His glory and came down to earth to be born as a man. But Advent isn't Christmas. It's a time for watching, for waiting, for anticipation.

God promised His people that He would send a Savior to deal with all the worry, concern, fear, pain, and sadness of our broken world. Jesus fulfills God's promise to His people. (1 Corinthians 1:9) Jesus came to be with us to take all those burdens, all the brokenness that our sin has caused, taking it all to the cross for you and for me. While we still feel the consequences of all that brokenness, Jesus broke the power that sin and death had over us. You don't have to dread what's to come, because our risen Lord has promised to be there with you every day to the end of this age.

During Advent, we make ready to celebrate the arrival of God the Son in human flesh and bone. We remember what He has done to deliver us from the power of sin by becoming one of us. And we're looking ahead to the great day when Jesus, the Christ, comes to be with his people in all his authority and glory. Advent is a season to remember that Jesus comes to be with us, a time for anticipation.

Christmas is coming, but make no mistake: Jesus *is* with us even now. He's here now as we gather together in his name, hearing his word of life. He's here for you when you come to the altar and receive His body and blood. Jesus will also return.

Jesus called his disciples to stay awake and alert, to be ready for what was to come. This weekend, we get to sing one of my favorite Advent hymns, “My Lord, What a Morning.” It’s a hymn of anticipation that remembers Jesus’ words to his disciples: “*But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*” (Mark 13:24-27) As God’s people in Christ, you get to look ahead to Jesus’ coming to be with us again, the great day of the Lord when he forever takes away all the things that would cause us dread. Can you imagine what that will be like? It’ll be here before you know it!

Our sanctuary at St. John’s is decked out and ready, with the Advent wreath and Christmas tree and blue banners and paraments. Out in our communities, people are putting up Christmas decorations in homes and offices and shopping malls and supermarkets. Signs of the season abound! And that’s not a bad thing. Even if some decorations are out on display in support of crass commercialism, they can still serve as reminders of the good news of what’s to come. So when you see a Christmas tree or wreath, or notice a stylized Christmas-y image in a window or on an ad, take a breath and look at the sign of the season, remembering that the Christ is on his way. Let the signs of the season serve as reminders of what you can anticipate as you wait and watch for what’s to come.

If you recall, I did say that this sermon might have the best ending that you’ve ever heard. Sometimes, reality falls short of what we’re anticipating. But you can trust that God will keep His promise, and that’s what this season of anticipation is all about.

Advent is here. The Christ is on his way. Jesus comes to be with us. Alleluia!

Amen.