

# Advent: A Season of Hope

## First Sunday in Advent

Mark 13:24-37 Isaiah 64:1-9  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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November 30, 2014

We have just entered the liturgical season of Advent, a word that literally means 'coming' or 'arriving.' Advent, therefore, is a time of anticipation and active preparation of what is to come, a time in-between the now and the not yet. So what's coming ahead? Well for one, another Christmas is coming. So perhaps one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves, especially at this time of year, is **what would our world be like, and what would our personal lives be like, if Jesus had not been born?** Keep that question on your heart and mind between now and Christmas. Ponder and reflect upon the implications of a way of life without the teachings and ministry of the Jewish peasant itinerant preacher and prophet named Jesus of Nazareth.

Contrary to the manner in which the Sundays in December are often joyously celebrated, **the liturgical Season of Advent begins not on a note of joy, but of despair and warning.**

Today's Old Testament passage from **Isaiah 64** describes humankind as reaching the end of its rope. Having become aware of their sinfulness and waywardness, they plead to God for mercy. **Isn't that always the first step – realizing we have strayed too far off the path of life that we believe God is calling us to follow?** Much like the season of Lent that precedes Easter, Advent is an opportune time to take stock of your own life. Are there any course corrections that you feel may be necessary to help you get back on the right track? **Recognition and acknowledgment of what's really going on in our lives is an extremely important step in the process of healing, wholeness and spiritual growth.** But in and of itself, that step doesn't accomplish much good if it isn't followed by a response of some kind. **Perhaps God is calling us, calling you, calling me, to a change of direction in our thinking or behavior.** The theological term for that is repentance.

Perhaps we, like the ancient Hebrew people, need to **explore those areas in our lives that are causing us despair. For the path to hope often begins with an honest recognition of the despair we harbor and experience.**

The Gospel reading from **Mark 13** is also an interesting choice for this First Sunday of Advent. This passage is from an apocalyptic discourse about the end-of-time, the end of human history as we know it. Why, you may be wondering, would the assigned lectionary pick these particular Scripture passages to begin Advent? The appropriateness, while not immediately apparent, becomes clearer upon reflection.

Advent, after all, deals with the coming of the Messiah. And according to traditional Christian understanding, there are two comings, two advents. The first coming, of course, is Jesus' birth 2000 years ago. The second coming, appropriately referred to as the Second Coming, is something we rarely talk about. Many Christians

simply do not believe it will happen literally as it is described in the Scriptures. I am one of those people. **A majority of mainline biblical scholars today, in fact, approach apocalyptic literature in the scriptures as metaphorical and symbolic language, not literal history that will unfold.** The other way to interpret all that apocalyptic teaching in the Bible is that those who believed and preached that it would happen in their lifetime were simply wrong. Now there's a scandal of biblical proportions.

The traditional message of the Season of Advent, however, is a reminder that we are living *in-between* these times: that is, between "Christ has come" and "Christ will come again." Or as I referred to earlier, between the "now" and the "not yet." Yet in my opinion, far too many people in this country (usually those outside the mainline denominations) obsess over the Second Coming and the end-of-the-world as we know it. They tend to look at any disaster or tragedy as a possible sign of the end times. And yet, as declared in Mark 13:32, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only God" (Mark 13:32).

Instead, I think the primary lesson for us today, and a major theme for the Season of Advent, comes in the very next verse, "**Be on guard! Be alert.**" The passage ends with Jesus' words "What I say to you, I say to everyone: '**Keep awake.**'" The question that we are faced with on this First Sunday of Advent is this:

- **Are we awake, watchful, and on guard for the many ways in which our God is daily 'adventing' (coming) into your life and mine, supporting us and challenging us to bring the light of God's truth and love into this world's darkness?**

An appropriate Christian way of life, then, is marked by watchfulness, with an eye toward the future. It's also marked with the need for endurance and perseverance. **To 'keep awake' is to be faithful and diligent in our work, as individuals and as a congregation. And perhaps one of the best ways we can do that is to live in hope!** As Christians, we are called to give witness to how we live hopeful lives, even when our circumstances in life seem to call for despair. **For hope is the antidote to despair. And from a spiritual perspective, the primary source of our hope is revealed in the event of Christmas itself – Emmanuel, which means "God with us."** We have never been, nor ever will be, left alone to fend entirely by ourselves!

Saying that, **hope can be a hard commodity to come by for many during this season.** Abundant tree lights and glittering ornaments do little to relieve the despair some people feel at this time of year, or particularly this year.

We are reminded of the despair and frustration felt by so many in the aftermath of the events in Ferguson, Missouri. Yet, there is hope. We are reminded of the despair of those incarcerated in jails and prisons, of those who are homeless, of those who are lonely. Yet, there is hope. We are reminded of the despair of those, perhaps yourself, whose circumstances in life are indeed painful and difficult, for whatever reason. Yet, there is hope. The pastor of a Disciples of Christ church in Seattle, Joan Delaplane, O.P., writes:

**It is such experiences [of despair], however, that can move us to recognize the need for God. The sense of darkness and despair most often leads to inaction, to paralysis. The reality of Advent, however, is the admonition to be on guard, be awake, be alert.**

**God has chosen to need us to make God's love, God's presence, compassion, and power tangible. We cannot afford to be sleepwalkers. Time is too precious; God's people are too precious! Our lives are meant to make a difference in God's world, no matter how small that difference may seem to each of us.**

My hope this Advent is that you and I keep alert and awake, and **continue to be a beacon of light and hope to those whose lives are filled with despair. And as importantly, allow others to be a beacon of light and hope to you.** And in this, I hope to practice what I preach.

Amen.

Resources:

J.E. Dyer, *Jesus, Light in the Darkness*, patheos.com, Dec. 5, 2011