

Sermon: God's People

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37**

Today marks the beginning of a new liturgical year, the first Sunday of Advent, which begins a four-week church season that ends with Christmas. In the first century, every society had their own calendar – the Jewish lunar calendar, the Greek solar calendar, the Julian calendar, the Roman calendar, the Byzantine calendar. Over time, the church also developed a calendar and it has little to do with counting days.

Last week, we spoke a little about how it is always God who seeks us out. But Advent makes *us* look for God, to look beyond the obvious, without having to know exactly what tomorrow might bring. Advent teaches us to wait, to stay in the present, to enter into the fullness of life. Like little kids always wishing they were older, we don't need to race through life, we're meant to savor it. Learning to wait, learning to stay in the moment, brings insight and spiritual growth. In a highly material world that never stops, learning to wait helps us listen for the voice of God.

Aside from just learning to wait, to slow down and appreciate what's right in front of us now, what else are we waiting for in Advent? The word *Advent* is from the Latin and it means 'coming.' We're waiting for what's coming next. And there are three.

First, we're waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus. That by itself is no big deal. As Saint Augustine said, we're only recalling the fact that Jesus was born.

The second is bigger. It's about God coming to us in Scripture, in the Eucharist, and in the community, right here and now, and tomorrow and the next day and the day after that.

Finally, Advent points to what we call the Second Coming, or the Parousia, at the end of time, when Jesus has promised that the Son of Man will return in glory, bringing the reign of God in all its fullness. So, Advent includes three 'comings' – past, present, and future, and they will all come together in God's kingdom. We have the joy of living in God's presence now and in watching for the joy of life in the future.

The first verse of the first reading on the first Sunday of Advent says it all, as far as our hopes and expectations for the season go: ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.’ Isaiah is talking about God’s *in-breaking* into the world, something which has happened before, when God ‘did awesome deeds that we did not expect,’ such as the Exodus event when God delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh and slavery. And when Isaiah says that ‘from ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you,’ he’s saying that God – El, Elohim, YHWH – has a hand in everything good that happens to us.

When the Persian king Cyrus defeated Babylon, he thanked his own god, Marduk, for the victory. But to Isaiah, it was *God* who empowered Cyrus on behalf of the Israelites. How could it be otherwise? Eventually, Cyrus came to believe it too.

So, there is only God, our Father the potter, and we are the clay. God’s fingerprints are all over us, and we are all God’s people.

Our first Gospel reading of this new church season drops us in the middle of Mark, right after Jesus warned about wars and rumors of wars, and false prophets. Jesus describes the signs – plural – that will signal the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and so on – this passage is sort of wrapping up where we left off in Matthew last week. And when the Son of Man returns, the intent is to gather his elect – God’s faithful people – *for their salvation*, not to judge them as sinners.

In the second part of Mark’s reading, Jesus says, ‘from the fig tree learn its *parable*.’ Many words have been written about what this verse, and this parable, might mean. Mark says, in chapter 4, that Jesus only teaches in parables, and that he tells parables so that *outsiders* won’t understand his teachings, yet he explains them to his disciples. We’re meant to learn something from the fig tree but there’s no explanation from Jesus.

Let’s try this then: just as new leaves on the fig tree are a sign of summer, so also the darkened sun and moon and falling stars are signs that ‘he’ – probably the Son of Man – is near. Jesus is comparing natural events with historical ones. Events tend to follow one another in a logical, inevitable manner, one sign after another.

But – beware, keep awake! We missed him the first time around; God doesn’t tear open the heavens every day.

There is an old Czech legend about Wenceslaus I, Duke of Bohemia and a posthumous saint and king, and later the subject of a Christmas carol. The legend says that a huge army of knights sleep inside Blaník Mountain. Whenever the Motherland is in danger or in its darkest times and close to ruin, the statue of King Wenceslaus in Wenceslaus Square in Prague will come to life, raise the army sleeping in Blaník, and slay the enemies of the Czechs, returning peace and prosperity to the land.¹

That part is true. There is also a Soviet-era joke that says late one night, around this time of year, a man in the Square saw Wenceslaus and the army riding into Prague. He stopped them and asked what was going on. Wenceslaus said that they had heard times were bad and that they came to fight and return peace and prosperity to the land. The man said, ‘No, the government just announced a new five-year plan!’

Wenceslaus called out to his army, ‘Everyone back to the mountain! Things are going to get worse!’

This is a worry for a lot of people today, that no matter what, no matter how things are right now, there is a good chance that they’re going to get worse. Have we as a society suddenly lost the ability to treat each other with respect? Have political leaders around the world decided that an unstable world represents a prime opportunity to gain an edge on their neighbors? Most of us can only stand around and watch it all unfold.

Like a man going on a journey who puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch – who is the doorkeeper supposed to watch? Is he keeping an eye on those shifty slaves or is he on the lookout for the sheriff? Who or what are we watching? Will our worry about what’s happening today and what might happen tomorrow so occupy our thoughts that we’ll forget to watch the fig tree?

We *can* be sure that the future holds some surprises though.

The Cubs might win the World Series again – in our lifetimes. Or maybe not.

The first Sunday of Advent serves as the *apocalyptic climax* to what we’ve heard from Matthew the past few weeks. Over time, the expected arrival of the Messiah kept getting pushed back when Jesus didn’t reappear, so the community recalibrated when the Second Coming must occur, and it’s now as far out there as it can get. In the Middle Ages, the typical themes for the four weeks of Advent were death, judgement, heaven, and hell. Imagine hearing a sermon about hell on the Sunday before Christmas.

We can't predict, and we can't control what will happen *then*. We can only expect that it will happen and that it will unfold from what we already know, like predicting tomorrow's weather based on what we see today and on prevailing trends – winter is coming: it's going to get cold.

No one knows *when* but the Father. There will be signs though, with Jesus himself being one of them.

So we're looking back even as we're looking ahead, way far ahead. For Isaiah, there is no longer a conqueror at the gate, no crisis of exile, just the every day challenges of faith and community. Isaiah has asked for God to split the heavens and come on down. Jesus – Emmanuel, God with Us – says 'be careful what you wish for.' He also seems to be saying that the end times are always at hand but not yet. We can neither delay nor speed the process; we can only watch.

But we're not powerless; we're not like deer caught in the headlights. We are each left with work to do. We watch, work, and wait with the authority that comes from the very One for whom we wait. We just need to do our job, so to speak, and be present.

Amen.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wenceslaus_I,_Duke_of_Bohemia, accessed 1 December 2017.