

Sermon: Let's Get This Party Started

Year C, Advent 1

[Jeremiah 33:14-16](#); [Psalm 25:1-10](#); [1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#); [Luke 21:25-36](#)

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Welcome to Advent, our time of preparation. And we can all see it coming. The cooking, the cleaning, the shopping, the wrapping, the fighting over parking spaces, the decorating, the partying, the wishing people well, the tipping, the writing cards, the visiting relatives you'd prefer not to be related to, the ironing, the waking up with grandkids at way too dark an hour. And even if you love Christmas, there is something that's coming in the next few weeks that you don't love. In fact, you dislike it so much that sometimes you secretly think to yourself that you like Thanksgiving better. But however much we love or hate what's coming, ready or not, here it comes.

In case we missed the cues, we've been able to buy Christmas M&Ms at Walgreens since Halloween. Shutterfly has already run weeks of promotions to get us to order our personalized Christmas cards. I was picking up my niece last week in Boston, before Thanksgiving, and someone was blasting Christmas carols out into the traffic. Here's the one time of the year when the secular society in which we live, gloms onto a Christian holiday. You have to admire the verve and determination with which they prepare for the birth of a savior whom they don't recognize as offering them salvation.

It's such a strange time of year. We have the oompah band of the impending holiday roaring away in the background. And yet the Patriots are going to keep playing on Sundays. We're going to need groceries and laundry. We've got school and work and the car needs an inspection. The gutters should probably get cleaned out just in case this winter is like last one and did you remember to put out the extension cord we needed last winter but we didn't have because there was too much snow to sort it out? There's all our regular life and then there's this tsunami coming ashore and we know it's coming.

It seems like we have time before it comes. We have as much time as between Halloween and Thanksgiving. But we all know it won't feel that way. We'll feel rushed and exhausted and no matter how much we do, the list won't get any shorter. Time will buckle and bend in all sorts of weird ways. And then somehow, in January, it will smooth itself out and start to run normally again.

Here's the thing, though. Advent isn't a time to prepare for Christmas. We think it is. Maybe because Lent really is a time to prepare for Easter and we kind of assume it's the same deal. But Advent, which starts today, the very first Sunday of the church calendar, is a time to prepare for the Second Coming. We start the year off basically forcing ourselves to look at the resolution we made when we accepted Christ in our lives: Christ in his mercy will come again to bring forth God's kingdom on this earth. We resolved to do our very best to be ready for that day and to work towards the arrival of that kingdom. So just like all the Weight Watchers and gym ads that run in January, here is the church reminding us to work on the things we swore to get around to because they are important and yet easily put aside.

I can imagine a number of responses to this reminder of the true purpose of Advent is to prepare for the Second Coming:

Can it come soon? If it could arrive tomorrow, I wouldn't have to clean for the in-laws arrival in a couple of weeks.

I can prepare for Christmas or I can prepare for the Second Coming, but I cannot do both. Take your pick.

I get it. Me too. And since I don't believe in asking anyone to do something I would not be willing to do myself, I have been thinking about how to use the upheaval of the next patch of time to help prepare myself for Christ's Kingdom. Because the reality is that it will be full and busy and distorted and will have way too much packed into it. Ask me in January what I would want to do to prepare for the Second Coming, I would talk about quiet reflection and journaling. But to pretend that I am going to be able to carve out more time in the coming weeks to reflect on my faith is not only naïve, it is the kind of pretence that separates me from God, because I am lying to myself about what I am able to do in the real world. And Jesus is perpetually asking us to live in the real world.

So first off, notice how distorted everything feels. Time races and then drags. You remember Christmases from when you were a kid like they were yesterday and you've left the milk in the trunk because you didn't even remember stopping at the grocery on the way home. You do an enormous amount of stuff you don't do at any other time of the year and yet for the rest of the year, it feels like you're flat out.

That distortion is what being a Christian is. We believe that what happened 2,000 years ago matters to our lives so much that we look for new ways to connect to them. We look back again and again, not only to Jerusalem but to Antioch as Paul began his work and then to Rome and Germany and England. We worship in a building that is over a hundred years old, not because it's terribly convenient to do so but because it connects us to our history. We believe that principles established long ago should determine how we should behave. And we believe that things beyond what we can measure in this world are vitally important, even when much of the rest of the world does not. We look back beyond the New Testament to the Hebrew Bible because we believe prophets like Jeremiah are speaking to us still.

Jeremiah was speaking to a group of people who were looking back. They were in exile in Babylon, having lost everything, their country, their homes, their future. They were facing death as a people,¹ if not as individuals. Jeremiah asked them to turn around and look at the days that are surely coming. He asked them to use their imagination of what God had promised was coming. A time of salvation and safety. A time when the Lord would reign over all. They were in exile, there was nothing in what surrounded them that would even remotely suggest that salvation and safety were even a possibility. They had been defeated in war. To them, that meant that their god had been defeated by the gods of the Babylonians. And yet there is Jeremiah, urging them to remember not only the past, but to remember the promises God had made. To contort themselves and look to the future and remember the promises. He asked them to live in the real world, with all its challenges. But to live with the promised world that was coming pulling on them just as hard.

¹ Jennifer Ryan Ayres, "First Sunday of Advent, Theological Perspective, Jeremiah 33:14-16" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 2.

Jeremiah asks his people to live in the present world, but live in that world overlaid with what was to come. So does Paul. In today's letter to the Thessalonians, he too is asking them to live into the future. For Paul, the future holds such treasures. There will be even more faith, because what is lacking will be restored. And oh the love that is coming, love for one another and for God. There is work to be done. With Paul, there is always work to be done. So possessed by the Holy Spirit that Paul sets out to tour the Roman Empire to bring the experience of Jesus Christ to everyone. But Paul undertakes that mission as a tent maker, as a man who has to earn a living. In the middle of all that faith and love, there will be work to be done. And the work will make them holy, ready to stand blameless before God.

So this standing with one foot in the past and another in the future, this living in the present with a future laid on top of it that can barely be recognized in the turbulence of today, all that distortion is what being a Christian is, all year round. But during Advent, the volume of the distortion gets turned up to 11. So notice in the next few weeks what a challenge it is, not because you're a martyr, but because this is what it is like all year long, but we don't really notice.

And when you're sitting on a towering cloud of road rage or parking lot rage or when the gremlins in your house have used up all the scotch tape *and not mentioned it to anyone* and someone, we're not naming names here, has decided to put heavy cream in their coffee and therefore you can't make the au gratin potatoes properly. When you're in the midst of the most every day non-Kingdom-of-God moment, think of Advent as that time of preparation for the Second Coming.

Advent is at the beginning of the church year to remind us of our resolutions to do the work for the kingdom of God, to get ready to love God and one another, to strengthen our faith so we might be blameless when we meet God and the Saints. But Advent is also right before Christmas so that as we prepare for the Second Coming we can let go of any doubts or worries that perhaps Jesus is not coming back. We know he is coming back. Christmas is a miracle for so many reasons. But the one that tends to sneak past us is that Christmas happened at all. God came to the earth and lived among us. How could we possibly merit such love and compassion? We can be assured that God will come again because God came the first time.

So bring it on. Let the whole tsunami of Christmas race into our lives. We're getting ready for the Second Coming. O Come, O Come Emmanuel. Let's get this party started.