

## **Waiting is the Hardest Part**

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on November 29, 2020  
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

*But in those days, after that suffering,  
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.*

*Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. 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.*

*From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

*But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. (Mark 13:24-37, NRSV)*

Happy New Year! As I've said, today is the beginning of a new liturgical year in the church, which we begin with the season of Advent. Our word “Advent” is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning “coming,” and so Advent is a season of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. In this season, we are invited to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah. We are invited to live again in that space between what *is* and what *should be*.

The early Christians knew that the greatest gift of all was worth waiting for. Just as they knew Christ in their daily walk, they also sought to *re-experience* the longing and the desperate desire for his *coming*, to explore again the meaning of his birth through worship, liturgy, song, and committed lives – all practices of trust and of patience ... of *waiting*.

And yet, as Tom Petty once put it, waiting is the hardest part, isn't it? While in 2020 we have had to learn something about waiting, it still doesn't come easy. It seems that everyone wants to rush right into Christmas.

The rush starts early – right after Halloween, usually – and runs relentlessly through New Years’, with a big bump on “Black Friday,” that annual ritual in which people trample others for sales exactly one day after giving thanks for what they already have. And of course, now, Black Friday sales *actually* start on *Thursday afternoon (Thanksgiving afternoon!)*. We Americans just don’t like to wait.

And so, why not just forget about Advent – let’s just be honest with ourselves. Bring on Christmas now! And why not? Isn’t Christmas often the locus of some of our fondest memories? Certainly, some of my happiest memories as a child are associated with it. And most of them came *after* a six-year old me understood that the physics of flying reindeer just didn’t add up.

Now of course, back in those days, it was the presents that made or broke Christmas. I remember as a seven year-old getting the greatest toy of all time: a big red T-Rex model that made me the envy of the neighborhood ... at least until a year later, when my neighborhood rival got a TRS-80 computer. Another Christmas was *ruined* by getting too many clothes and not enough things to race or blow up outside ☺

But it wasn’t *always* just about getting more and more stuff. The whole season leading up to Christmas was magical. There was the time when my younger sister, about 5 at the time, excitedly and very sincerely screamed to Mom and me, “I just saw 14 elves!!!!” I always wondered about that. Not the elves so much as how she was able to count them so fast.

Many years later and with a little maturity, I remember genuinely beautiful church services all through December with family and then of course on Christmas Eve, followed by eggnog with my grandmother by the fireplace and telling stories. Those were good days.

My grandmother has since passed on, my sister no longer sees elves, and no one under the age of 40 even knows what a TRS-80 was, but the memories usually come back to me in a happy way. We must acknowledge that for many of us, this season is also painful (for me too) – a reminder of what once was and now isn’t. But the pain hurts precisely because it is so often rooted in real memories of special traditions and sacred times.

And finally, of course, dare we forget, there is the precious baby Jesus ... the true meaning of Christmas ... the “reason for the season” as we say. The story of his birth is the most beloved story of all time, told and re-told more than any other, put on display in serene nativity scenes and enacted in cute children’s pageants. And it is no wonder that we can lose ourselves in the beauty and sweetness of it. In a season already awash in nostalgia and sentimentality, the story of the birth of Jesus seals the deal.

So, between running up credit cards at the mall, “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” chestnuts roasting on an open fire, and the singing of angels over the little town of Bethlehem, why bother with Advent? Why *wait*? Why can’t we just start celebrating Christmas now?

But perhaps you're not taken in by all this. Perhaps you *are* intrigued and wonder what it would be like to take this crazy Advent waiting idea seriously. And so, in your naivete, you turn to our scripture readings for this morning, expecting to get some solace. Do they jar you as much as they jar me? Do they not seem like a most bizarre and unwelcome intrusion into this happy party?! They break the spell of the good ole days and speak, well, of the *end* of days ... of a time of *judgment*, of a coming reckoning which no one will escape.

The Old Testament text from Isaiah speaks of a God prepared to come down in might:

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!* (Isaiah 64:1-2, NRSV)

And not to be outdone, our gospel reading this morning speaks of those days, after unprecedented suffering, in which

*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.* (Mark 13:24-25, NRSV)

Sounds to me a whole lot like the Second Coming! The *Second* Coming? But what does *that* have to do with any of this? Isn't this season supposed to be all about the march to *Bethlehem*? Here's some little appreciated truth: Advent for the church *has* always been a season of waiting for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, but it has *also* always been a time of looking forward to the consummation of all things – that *second* coming of Christ, when he returns to claim his Kingdom.

What an odd juxtaposition ...looking ahead to the birth of Jesus, but *also* to the return of Jesus at the End of Time! Sure, both are "comings" (per the word "Advent"), but how *different* can they be?! In the first (the one we surely prefer to think about), we have baby Jesus ... meek and mild, no crying he makes, lying in a manger, with Mary and Joseph and "glad tidings of great joy" ... In the second, Jesus Christ – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords – who, with the armies of Heaven behind him, crushes the raging hordes of Evil, and who then reigns in glory forever and ever!

That latter stuff is *scary* stuff ... *Book of Revelation* stuff! Now we have *another* good reason to jump Advent and land straightaway into Christmas!

But is there a method to the madness of this? Is there something to be learned from this ... an Advent treasure we are meant to discover ... dissuaded though we may be by scary texts

pointing to judgment and wrath and the End of all things ... lost as it may be in the headlong rush to Christmas?

I think there is. Over the next few Sundays and to Christmas Eve, we will dig ... dig deep ... to find that Advent treasure. We will engage with John the Baptist in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom. We will hear again his call for repentance and for a radical conversion of heart, mind, and soul. We will join the young Mary in astonishment as she is told that she will bear the Savior of the world.

Yes, Christmas is coming. But let us not rush too quickly into it. Perhaps waiting *is* the hardest part, but it can be the *best* part too. May we live into the mystery of the season of Advent and discover for ourselves its surprising power. May we attend to the meaning of Jesus' birth for us and to the challenge his story poses to how we live and what we regard as important. May we tune out distracting voices and instead pick out the voices of angels and patiently follow the weary shepherds as we journey to Bethlehem to see the promise of God come true before our very eyes.

To the glory of God. Amen.