

## **Advent 1 B (December 3, 2017)**

Cathedral Church of St. John, Albuquerque

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As a Christian I often feel at odds with the rest of the world and never more than in Advent. While the rest of the world is singing Christmas carols, we are singing Advent hymns of longing and expectancy. While the rest of the world is decorating for Christmas, our sanctuary is relatively bare. On December 26th when the rest of the world is throwing out their trees and getting sick of carols we are just getting warmed up. Every year in Maine, around Thanksgiving my Methodist-pastor buddy Bruce and I had our annual fight in a restaurant about whether or not we should sing Christmas carols in Advent. He said there's not enough time to sing all the wonderful carols, and I said we need to live with the waiting and the longing. He declared we Anglicans are too gloomy, and I accused him of instant gratification. People lined up to watch us go at it. It was a fun, friendly fight, but at the base of it was a very real disagreement about what this season means. Advent has been kept by the more Catholic and Eastern churches for the past 1550 years as a time of preparation for the Feast of Christ becoming human. But the rest of the world completely ignores it. You can hardly even find purple candles any more.

All our lessons for the next four Sundays are full of longing and hope, exhortations to "Stay awake! Keep alert!" It is a time to remember whose birth it is that we await. Who it is and what he means will shape how we wait. You know we wait for different things in different ways. We feel differently if we are waiting for a far-away child to come home than if we wait for the mail. If that child is in Afghanistan we wait differently than if she is in Las Lunas. The Drinkwaters know something about waiting this year that they never knew before, how full waiting can be, not just with preparations but with yearning. When Michael said to me last week "My son Grant might choose an inconvenient time to arrive," his voice got all misty. Anyone who has had a child knows that those nine months of waiting are critical to becoming a family. This knowing is shared by adopting parents. How different it would be if we could flip a switch and poof! A child arrives.

To wait is to live in two times at once: having and not having. Waiting already contains something of what we wait for. If I am waiting for something, then I already know enough about it to prepare. If I'm waiting for the onslaught of winter at our yurt in the mountains, I will stack wood, seal the windows, make sure the propane is topped up because I know winter. When we wait for a loved one to come on a dark, rainy night and that loved one is late and not answering his cell, that waiting is filled with fear because we also know something of sudden death on the roads. But we don't always know much. Often our waiting is confused, uncertain, a muddy feeling in our gut in the midst of our messy life. Then our waiting is also for clarity and meaning.

Some kinds of waiting set us to cleaning the house and preparing a lavish meal, setting out fresh flowers and tossing the clutter on the table into the clothes dryer to hide it. (You can thank me for that tip later!) Some kinds of waiting, like for the results of a biopsy make us check our wills, make sure they are updated. Some kinds of waiting have us looking at our cell phones every few minutes. And other kinds make us turn on the TV to help us forget we are waiting.

Advent waiting shares all these qualities and then some. And here is the joke: even while we wait for God, God is not really absent to us. God remains with us even now in Advent. Bruce was right - of course God is already among us and within us. Yes, we are in a new liturgical season, a new church year even, but reality has not changed. Christ still shows up even as we wait for him. Advent calls us to wake up to it now, to include as part of our waiting that alertness to recognize, worship, and serve the Holy One who already here.

Are you spiritually awake? If not, then wipe the cobwebs out of your eyes and shake off sugar-induced sleepiness and look around. Where is grace breaking out in your life? Where is God calling you to embody God in this hungry and broken world? In our second lesson today Paul asks us to develop spiritual gifts as we wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. What are you working on spiritually as you waiting? Who is this Jesus for whom you wait? What does he mean to you? How does he engage your heart? Why are you here?

We also join with the prophets in wanting God to come into the chaos and bring order and meaning out of the devastation and terror of our world. **“Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”** cries Isaiah today. Do you feel that also? Think about this world! Cry it aloud with me. (3x) We yearn for justice to be done on the earth. We’ll hear more about that next week when we meet John the Baptist again. Set things right, O God! Can’t you see the suffering of your people? Syria, Puerto Rico, Mexico City, and nearby homes of violence and cruelty. Can’t you see the suffering of the planet? We, like the prophets yearn for God to come like a conquering hero and vindicate our risk of faith, our hopes which sometimes hang just by a thread. “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; show the light of your countenance and we shall be saved!” prays the psalmist today. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot fix the whole thing. It’s too big! Our waiting is filled with longing for God to COME! But also pressing is the other Advent word: WAIT! Isaiah begs God in a heartfelt plea: COME! But the Gospel says “WAIT! Stay awake. Stay faithful.” Come! Wait! Come! Wait! Advent lies in the throbbing tension between those two little words. It’s both. At the same time.

In Advent we look at Christ’s coming in Bethlehem, in the present moment, and at the end of time. But then God pulls another joke: We, like Isaiah, call for God to tear the heavens and come down in clouds of glory. And God does come, but not as we expected. He comes in a very normal, ordinary event: a human birth. Every one of us got here that way. Another, named Grant, will show up soon, perhaps even at an inconvenient time. In rejection, in poverty and pain, Jesus is born to a nobody mother in a nowhere place at an inconvenient time and must eek out a living on the edge of a desert. This is God near us, God with us, God as us, understanding our life with all its complexities because he also lived it. St. John Chrysostom said “This is God become human, so we can become God.” He comes in the face of the Other, the one who challenges us to deeper love. He comes to us in moments of grace when our hearts stir with new life after having turned to stone. He comes in the most painful moments of our lives. He comes in the bread and the wine to feed us and then sends us out to go be him in the world.

But first we need to feel the absence of God. When we know our need for God, we pray. That’s why “There are no atheists in foxholes.” In Advent we know ourselves to dwell in foxholes. All around is violence, shame, despair. In Advent we are not lulled by nice carols. God shakes us out of our sugar-sleep and tells us to WAKE UP! We need to feel the pain, to

own it, name it, ask God to be known to us through it. We need to live with the silence of God's absence, and the grief of God's absence. Anyone who has experienced terrible loss knows you cannot fill that space with anything less than what you have lost and have it mean anything.

Only the Beloved can touch our hearts the way they need to be touched. We deceive ourselves if we think we can know the full joy of Christmas without feeling the burning yearning of Advent first. The point is not Christmas; the point is our need of and hunger for God who calls us to greater awareness of God's constant presence.

So, as we will say on Ash Wednesday which is not far off - Dear people of God, I invite you to the observance of a Holy Advent. Feel your need for God by experience the yearning. Try spending 10 minutes every day doing absolutely nothing but sitting still and being aware you are alive and in the presence of God. Ditch whatever you need to ditch: resentment, jealousy, judgmentalism, arrogance. Clean your inner house. Make in your heart a welcoming manger for the Christ child to be born.

There is a Christmas carol with an Advent verse. I will end with it. Bruce would be so happy.

*“Oh holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray.  
Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels, their great, glad tidings swell:  
O come to us, abide in us, our Lord, Emmanuel.”*