

First Sunday in Advent
I Corinthians 1:3-9, Psalm 80, Mark 13:24-37
David Teschner
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Welcome to the peculiar season of Advent. This morning we have a barren fir tree without lights or decorations for now. It represents a branch or shoot from the root of Jesse. Jesse was King David's father. The prophet Isaiah foretold that the next great leader of Israel, later called the messiah, would come from Jesse and David's lineage.

We have a flat wreath with four candles representing the four Sundays in Advent. Each week we light one more anticipating the arrival of the full light, the light of Christ, coming into the world. By the way, Advent, from the Latin *adventus*, means *coming* or *arrival*.

Have you noticed that the main altar table is missing? That's so I, too, can face east. Churches face east because tradition has it that when Jesus returns, he'll come from the same direction as the sunrise to announce and inaugurate a really new day.

And how strange is it that today's reading in the gospel of Mark, chosen for the beginning of our church year, is about the end of time?

When one radio station has been playing only Christmas music for over a week now and Christmas Santas and sales outnumber the stars of the sky, Advent announces a savior coming in glory on the clouds, not in a sleigh packed with gifts. It's easy to ignore or overlook Advent because Christmas is just 25 days away and counting.

Friendly's Restaurant used to have an ice cream dessert called "Happy Endings." Maybe they still do. It was a tasty way to end one's meal. The second coming of Christ, which Advent announces, should be a happy ending as well. A darkened sun and a lights-out moon, falling stars and shaking heavens sound a little scary, but only for those who aren't prepared. For the initiated, this cosmic turn of events is the "Happy Ending" they have been waiting for. It will mark the end for some, perhaps, but a new beginning for the faithful.

You see, in the New Testament, wakefulness, sobriety, watchfulness and alertness are code words for faithfulness. The believers originally hearing this message are under attack from the Romans. They are suffering persecution for their faith in Jesus, so they would be glad to see the old world under Roman domination collapse. God's coming would mean the new era, sometimes referred to as "a new heaven and a new earth."

While we have it pretty darn good, there are many, many more who would welcome a new world order, especially one in which God were on the throne. These pray, "Come, Lord Jesus" with regularity, I suspect. In love, we can want a new heaven and earth for them and at the same time work and pray for greater justice and equality for all in this present world – *Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.*

As I have said frequently, we may not want the world to end and have a hard time believing it will be just like the Bible depicts, but we should still be ready for it however and whenever it might happen. Advent is such a time to get ready if we are not, so we can live ready all the time.

Some of you have heard me talk about my experience in Sierra Leone, West Africa, when I went to visit my mother and stepfather and my stepbrother. In the late 1980's, my stepfather was the Peace Corps doctor there, and his youngest son was a volunteer.

I went to be with them for Thanksgiving, and on the following Sunday attended a tiny Anglican church in the small village of Songo, where my stepbrother lived and worked. It was the First Sunday of Advent. An older, local man named Mr. Christian, a layman, led us in the service of Morning Prayer from the 1662 Church of England Prayer Book.

I was the only other adult in the church along with five children of various ages. They were siblings or cousins, and all were preparing for either baptism or confirmation next time a priest or bishop visited the little church. I as a white man was such an oddity that the children all sat in the same pew next to me. The youngest, a boy named Moses, put his head in my lap for a short nap during the sermon.

The sermon was naturally about the second coming of Christ. Mr. Christian was emphatic that when Jesus came back it would be on a Sunday morning, and he would only come to the church to gather up his flock. He told the children that Jesus would not be knocking on the doors of their parent's houses to wake them up. If they weren't in church when Jesus came, they would miss him.

I'm not sure I agree with Mr. Christian as to which day of the week and which place Jesus will visit, but I liked the message of being always ready by keeping certain disciplines such as going to church regularly. I wondered if those children went straight home and told their parents what they had heard that morning. For some, Advent can truly be a wakeup call.

One of the things I particularly like about fly fishing in mountain streams or rivers is the constant state of readiness one must be in, in hopes of catching a trout on a tiny imitation fly. I prefer to cast upstream, which means the line is drifting back toward me. To see a lightning-fast strike, one has to be both watching carefully and taking up the slack line as it comes toward you at the speed of the river. The strike will be the slightest of twitches. It takes 100 percent focus and concentration. Some fishermen like to use a strike indicator, which is like a bobber, but for me that's a little like cheating.

I yearn to be so focused in a beautiful place for several hours. All the problems of the world, the church or family are temporarily set aside completely. And the trout, of course, are among God's loveliest creatures.

In the spiritual life, we also need to be focused on those things that direct us to divinity. God is always flowing toward us, and Jesus tried to simplify it for us when he said we are to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. The Bible and the church are the helps we need to stay on task. Prayer for and service to others in love is the mission.

While Advent is about a future hope, we can only live and serve God one day at a time. Ray Edman wrote, "The most important consideration about the future is to do faithfully what is before us today." In that way we are always at the ready.

I was at a meeting with the bishop and some other clergy not long ago. The bishop invited a woman priest in our diocese who runs a program for people with addictions to make a short presentation. She told us a mind-boggling statistic. She said, "Whereas, U.S. citizens make up only 5 percent of the world's population, we make up 99 percent of the people in the world addicted to hydrocodone or prescription pain drugs and 80 percent of the people in the world addicted to illegal drugs." She also said that one in five children in the United States grows up in addictive homes.

For what we consider to be greatest nation in the world, we obviously have a lot of citizens living in great anguish if we use such an abundance of pain-numbing substances. As people of faith, we can offer real hope to people living in quiet or not-so-quiet desperation.

I had a very full and satisfying Thanksgiving holiday. I hope you did, too. One of the many highlights was being here on Wednesday when two families came to pick up Thanksgiving dinner boxes from Martin's, which our church outreach provides. We gave away 10 boxes in all, the other 8 boxes to families that Social Services picked out for us.

I had never seen the contents of a box, but it was impressive with rolls, cranberry sauce, three vegetables, a large turkey and a lemon pie. It held enough to feed 8-10 people. When the families saw how much food was in the box, they could hardly contain themselves, thanking me and hugging me profusely.

We typically do 30 such boxes at Christmas time with outreach funds from our budget, special Christmas endowment fund earnings and more in donations from many of you. That is just one of the ways we give hope to people. Inviting them to be part of our church family and Jesus' family is a big one. Welcoming warmly all who come helps keep us ready and will help make them ready when Jesus returns the final time.

Oh, and this peculiar Advent color, blue? It's the color of hope. May this odd, little, four-week season restore our hope in the utter faithfulness of our God and help us extend it to everyone we meet. AMEN.