

First Sunday in Advent
Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Matthew 24:36-44
David H. Teschner
December 1, 2013

Christmas is already here for some because carols can be heard over the air waves, trees with colored lights can be seen in some yards or living rooms, but mostly because merchants have been selling Christmas for weeks now. For Episcopalians and some other Christian denominations, Christmas is in the air because Advent is finally here.

Glorious Advent! There's no missing it here as its signs abound – warm blue hangings, the Jesse tree, a four-candled wreath and distinctive Bible readings and hymns. If the world's New Year begins with a bright ball dropping and millions counting down, our church's new year begins with a single candle and all of us counting up to 4 as we eagerly anticipate recalling Christ's coming into our world.

During these next few weeks, we'll surely ask ourselves if our Christmas shopping is in order. The season of Advent urges us to ask another question, "Do we have our lives in order?"

Are we ready if Jesus were to come back this Advent season?

Advent is from the Latin word "adventus," which means coming. In this season, we are reminded that Christ is coming back to earth for a second time to judge the world.

Other A words associated with Advent are: aware, alert, attuned, alive and attentive.

Probably the busiest and most hectic time of the year comes in a season when we are beckoned to disarm, slow down, practice patient waiting, smell the balsam, watch a candle slowly flicker and be comforted by the warm blue color. It's a time for some silence, a time to unburden ourselves and not feel guilty for having so much. We needn't be ashamed of our abundance if we can share more and provide for the wants and necessities of others.

For my birthday a few weeks ago, my sons gave me a creative and useful gift – a private yoga lesson and 3 follow-up group classes. I wanted to have the private session before they came for Thanksgiving so I chose last Tuesday morning. As the appointment approached, I realized I had scheduled it at the worst possible time. The week before Thanksgiving is a short week, and I had to prepare two bulletins, two sermons, and we had to get the December newsletter out. In a very small way, keeping that appointment was like trying to observe Advent before Christmas. To my surprise, what I found was that the emphasis of doing yoga is not just to improve one's physical condition but also one's mental, spiritual and psychological condition. After yoga one should be more relaxed, at peace and better prepared to face life's challenges, come what may.

As it turned out, we got everything done by Wednesday noon, except this sermon, so Claire and I had ample time to get ready for our guests. Was it the yoga? I know it settled me and helped me be more focused.

If we can take the time and make the effort during Advent to be more awake, alert, attentive and alive to God's presence in the people we encounter and all the circumstances we face, this Christmas will be more meaningful for everyone around us.

In the reading from the prophet Isaiah we heard earlier, God envisions a world transformed. What's "adventus" or coming is a time when all wars will cease and weapons will be converted to implements of agriculture. Can we walk in the light of that future now?

Jesus tells us in Matthew's gospel that his second coming will be similar to those who missed their reservation on Noah's ark – a big mistake! Some have suggested that, today, the church is comparable to the ark.

Some of you have heard me tell of the time many years ago when I spent the first Sunday in Advent in a small village in Africa. With me that morning in the little, ramshackle church were five children, all related, and a wizened, old layman, who led us in Morning Prayer. In the sermon, he appropriately talked about the second coming of Jesus. He told the children, who were preparing for either baptism or confirmation, that when Jesus came back, it would be on a Sunday morning. Furthermore, Jesus wasn't going to knock on the doors of their houses to wake them up. No, Jesus was coming directly to the church, and he would take with him only those who were here and ready. I wonder what they went home and told their parents? I'll never forget that sermon.

Jesus goes on in Matthew's gospel to describe two pairs of people going about their daily chores side by side, two will be working in the field, and two will be grinding meal. When Jesus returns only one from each set will be taken. Why the one when both are doing the exact same thing? We must assume that, in each case, only one was ready, awake, expectant and spiritually attuned. The other must have been in a state of ignorance. We may not have to be in church when Jesus comes, but being in church and part of the body of Christ regularly should keep us mindful of another reality breaking in.

My favorite image of one who lived in perpetual readiness was the minuteman in Lexington and Concord in 1775. Each minuteman had his musket nearby as he went about his daily chores. If and when the alarm sounded, he could, in a minute's time, grab his gun and assemble with his local militia on the town green to face the Red Coat threat.

We, too, are expected to go about our daily activities with love and care all the while knowing that at any minute Christ might come again and call us home. We will always be prepared for such a moment if we are committed to loving God and our neighbor as ourselves.

Welcome blessed Advent! AMEN.

