

This is the first Sunday of Advent, four Sundays before Christmas. Advent is a celebration of the church, a season of waiting and preparation for both the celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas and the return of Christ at the second coming. Most of us know how to do the first part: waiting for the Christmas celebration. The tree is being decorated, presents are being sent overseas, travel plans are all in order, and we have discussed or are beginning to discuss where we will have our dinners and in what order. We will also be preparing for the Christmas play.

Here at APC, we look forward to the third Sunday, when Sunday school will lead us into a service celebrating Christ's child, born two thousand twenty-four years ago. Christmas has become about Santa, shopping, gifts, and family dinners.

A little festivity, joyful cheer, and colorful celebrations seem healthy in a world full of terror, dullness, worries, and uncertainty. Besides, it is an excellent opportunity to share the love with those around us, for whom giving or receiving might equally be challenging.

Yet, most of us, or most of the general population, will never think about the other half of why we celebrate Christmas and the season of Advent. It is a time to remember the coming of Jesus for the second time as we recall his birth in Bethlehem. Throughout the gospels, Matthew, Luke, John, and other biblical texts testify to Jesus, who spoke of his second coming. He will come like a thief in the night (Matthew 24) and like the bridegroom to the wedding feast (Matthew 25). Still, no one knows the day or hour (Luke 21), and when it happens, it will be a terror for those who do not know him or are unprepared for his coming. But for those who know Jesus and are ready, his coming will be glorious and celebratory. Jesus Christ is coming again, the Son of Man, often referring to those who have work to do in God's plan of redemption and salvation. His return will be visible, tangible, and real; all people and the whole world will see it. Whether literally or metaphorically, he will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, accompanied by angels with a loud trumpet call.

Most people view the vision of the Second Coming as metaphorical, filled with unfamiliar imagery, the imagery recognizable only to the people of the early church, where kings and horsemen existed instead of electric cars and AI.

Vincent van Gogh captures the mood of this Advent text in his most famous painting, 'The Starry Night' (1889). The painting displays the bold colors for which van Gogh is known, as well as the post-impressionist style he helped popularize. Van Gogh was the son of a Dutch pastor and, at one point, an evangelist to the poor himself, so he was likely familiar with texts such as this one from Luke 21. The painting depicts an apocalyptic sky similar to that described by Jesus. There are

swirling clouds in bold yellows and whites against deep, dark blues and blacks. One art critic describes a bright yellow moon and very bright stars as rockets of burning yellow. In the background is a small town, with the church steeple as its most prominent feature. In the foreground, a foreboding flame-like image connects the earth and sky. Art historians interpret it as a cypress tree, which would have been associated with graveyards and mourning in van Gogh's time. The famous painting elicits differing reactions from those who admire it. Some see it as a daunting image of a frightening sky, while others view it as something bold and beautiful, or we can see a glimpse of God.

Luke also paints a picture. Like Jeremiah living through Babylonian invasion, destruction, and violence, Luke, although there are frightening images, does not offer them to make us fearful or condemned but to give hope and joyful expectation. God in Christ is coming because God loves us and wants to redeem us. The days are surely coming when God will raise a righteous branch to spring up that will execute justice and righteousness. Amid the fearful happenings, Jesus, the Lord our righteousness, calls us to stand up and raise our heads because our redemption draws near. Even in our world, filled with famine, drought, war, conflict and violence, inequalities, moral crises, diminishing values, loss of dignity, and misplaced priorities, Christ calls us to be alert and pray for God's kingdom to break through into our world.

The most important part of this is God's call for us to wait and hope, waiting in eager expectation for our redemption and salvation. This way, we can recognize, lift our heads, and raise our hands when our redemption comes.

Understanding this message of Advent or the true and whole meaning of Christmas requires more than knowing the story and feeling the good vibes; it involves signs in the sun, moon, and stars, the earth distressing the sea and waves, people fainting from fear and foreboding, and the powers of heaven shaking. This might seem strange to some, and we may be labeled as radical, fanatical, or fundamentalist, out of touch with reality. It is like the green leaves on the trees, like the dawn of the day... like the rain and the warmth of the sun.

So Jesus says in verse 34 that we should be on guard as the end is near. I am surprised by this verse and how perfectly it describes our state of life. Many people struggle with the weight of life, feeling a constant lack of fulfillment in their hearts, dealing with burnout or emotional exhaustion, remaining unsatisfied, and always searching for ways to fill their emptiness. Many of us live in despair, without hope. To this, Jesus calls us to live in hope and be alert so we do not lose sight of his coming; his redemption is near. He accomplished this through Jesus, who was born long ago and promised to return. Jesus is our hope.

Richard Rohr says that in the season of Advent, we are invited to pray amidst our doubts and despair, praying that we may have strength so we have hope without sight, knowing without proof—emptying ourselves to be filled with the presence of God. Through prayer, we wait actively yet quietly, and God will make us grow and learn to walk closer to God to deepen our relationship. Through this journey, we may see a different way of knowing that Christ's grace, mercy, love, and forgiveness are the redemption of our lives—both already and not yet.

A Welsh poet and priest, R. S. Thomas, says this in his poem “Kneeling.”

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak, the air a staircase,
For silence, the sun's light
Ringing me as though I acted
A great role, and the audiences
Still, all that close throned
Of spirits waiting, as I, for the message prompt me, God,
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak,
Through me, sometimes, I am lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

So, in the business of this season, let us slow down as we wait prayerfully, attentively, and openly, being present and alert. We lift our eyes beyond the walls of our lives and this world to the one who comes, with great hope of the salvation that comes. God loves us. Christ will come again. How incredibly joyful a celebration that is! How wonderful and glorious is our God...

