

“What Are We Waiting For?”  
Isaiah 2: 1-5     Matthew 24: 36-44  
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I am delighted to be here, beginning my interim ministry with you on this first Sunday in Advent, when we are able to begin two journeys at the same time! One of the purposes of the structure of the Liturgical Calendar is to be instructive, so let me give a quick description about this season that stands as the beginning of the church year. Perhaps we will also get some ideas about how the church calendar and our shared work might support one another.

Advent is a time of preparation and anticipation. At its worst, that is to say, from the most superficial perspective, Advent is the time for frantically planning church and family activities and it is the time when we decide what it is we want to receive for Christmas. According to our cultural folklore we communicate our desires to “Santa Claus” and then, with great excitement and impatience, we count the days until we can open our presents. Our consumerist culture seldom, if ever, takes the meaning of the season much further.

At its best, Advent is an opportunity to prepare ourselves for a new beginning as we enter the season that celebrates the completely astonishing gift we receive from God. But, even from the church pew, we might find ourselves wondering about the future, hoping that just as the Christmas season promises new life and meaning to the world, this church will experience a rebirth, a renewal of its vitality, and a return to a remembered time of good feeling, large congregations and economic prosperity. That can be quite a load of hope and expectation

Clearly, it is no accident that the church’s liturgical year begins with Advent rather than Christmas Day. If Christmas itself is the beginning, then it is reduced to the status of an event: an event that we wait for, that happens abruptly, and that is over just as abruptly (often leaving us

exhausted and perhaps disappointed). Then we get to wait until the event comes around again next year. If Christmas is only an event (even a very important one) then our only real choice is to be passive recipients, hoping that Christmas will be a good show and, of course, expecting that the coming of the Christ Child will be able to fix at least a few of the problems we have as individuals, families, churches, and as a world.

Advent is much more useful if we can rescue it – and perhaps Christmas, too – from the shallow perspective of consumerism and divine fixes. It then becomes possible to embrace Advent as the first step in a spiritual journey. And, much to our benefit, that first step includes making room for the presence of Emmanuel, God with us, in our lives. Christmas, in turn, finds its place in a much larger process.

Therefore, on this first Sunday in Advent, we acknowledge that we are not simply spectators or passive recipients of divine grace, rather we are participants in a sacred journey. Today stands as a beginning point in the process. Over the next year, we will follow the lectionary readings that deal with the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Lectionary calendar is a three-year cycle, largely because the Synoptic Gospel accounts (from Matthew, Mark, and Luke) differ somewhat and at least represent different perspectives about the life and ministry of Jesus. It will be three years until we are in this liturgical place again.

As we begin the journey, it makes sense to catalog our expectations, and determine how realistic they are. Are they realistic or fantasy-based? It's like the difference between the reality we see in our dream state and the reality we see when we are fully awake. Our dream world may promise us that a good Christmas can make all things better. It may tell us that God has the power and responsibility to bring peace into the world. It may hint to us that the right minister can restore the church to its prior (or future) glory. In our dream world these changes happen outside of ourselves leaving us simply to wait, perhaps faithfully, or impatiently, until all is made clear at Christmas. We find this attitude throughout modern life and culture. Of course, it's only a short jump from there to

the belief that someone must be to blame if life does not turn out the way we want it to be.

In a way, the Advent Season looks at two very different ways that Jesus comes to us. One is his birth as the Incarnation of God, and the second is popularly known as “The Second Coming”. Christianity has developed the idea that just as Jesus was born into the world as an event in time, so this Second Coming will happen at a particular moment. There is a whole publishing industry, like the “Left Behind” series that trades on frightening people with such a belief. When we read the Gospels in context, however, it seems that Jesus downplays the idea of a particular world-ending event. He does not teach his disciples to watch the door for the divine entrance. He teaches them to be focused on life, on caring about one another, on loving one another, and on living purposefully in the Kingdom of God. Even in today’s reading from Matthew, the faithful servant is not calculating when Jesus might come so he will be ready and he is not watching the skies for a first glimpse of Jesus’ return. Rather, he is tending to his business of feeding people at the proper time.

As we consider the meaning of this first Sunday in Advent, perhaps we must ask the question very honestly: “What are we waiting for?”

We can hear this question two ways. We can try putting the emphasis on the first word of the question, “What.” What are we looking for: Divine intervention to fix everything, or a sacred process of growth and development, or something else?

Likewise, we can consider our own willingness and readiness to act. Then, the journey becomes ours to make: to love our neighbors and our enemies, to do justice in the world, and together, to live into the Kingdom of God – in short, to walk in God’s paths. Jesus and the prophets before him have made it clear what we are supposed to do, so what are we waiting for? Let’s get on with it.

Perhaps now, we can begin to discern the purpose of this immediate journey. We might ask: What could be the nature of our life as individuals and as the United Church ... Of Christ in this community? So ask yourself, "How do I believe God want me to be engaged in life?" And "How might the presence of God be obvious in the daily life of this church?" These are just two of the questions that we will find ourselves asking during this Advent season.

Remember that our journey and our questions have more to do with what is taking place in the present rather than what will happen to us as individuals and our collective church in the future. From the Prophet Isaiah we heard these words, "Let us go up to the mountain of the lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that [God] may teach us [God's] ways and that we may walk in [God's] paths." Learning the ways of God and walking in God's paths are not to be seen as moral tests that we will have to pass at some particular moment in the future. If we are truly created in the image of God, then learning about God's ways means learning about our own deepest identity and relationships every day. Likewise, walking in God's paths means living our lives with the deepest possible integrity, justice, and love.

The journey we affirm today is not like a spectator's ride through a holy theme park. It is not enough for us merely to observe. As we work our way through the lectionary and through the challenges of being a community of faith, every moment will matter. Every relationship will be significant, and the scriptures will be our constant companion – nourishing us, challenging us, and taking us to new levels of growth and community. It will be impossible to take this journey without being transformed by it in every imaginable way. It will be hard at times. It may be painful. But it will be a most worthwhile and meaningful journey.

We won't worry if we're measuring up to some arbitrary standard of behavior. We will only look to see if we are growing, maturing, coming to our fullness as people created in God's loving image. We will attend

to preparing our individual and communal souls to be saved, that is to say, made healthy and whole.

“Emmanuel” will not primarily be understood as “God with Me”. “Emmanuel” will be “God with Us”. We have already begun the journey, and the Christ is with us.

While part of our journey may focus on healing old wounds and issues and on addressing the structural and economic issues facing this congregation, it is also true that in this moment, gathered together in the name of Christ, we already have everything we need. We affirm today that we don't have to wait for Christmas. We can find hope in the present reality that we are all here together. We can be comforted in the knowledge that the Holy Spirit is at work in each individual, in each relationship, in each committee, in each family, throughout this church and community. If we wait for a “magical” day in the future, we may wait forever. But if we are ready to journey, then we have already begun to experience the Christmas gift. It is an internal gift that never ceases giving and being given. It may not look the same tomorrow, or next week, or next month, or next year. God is still speaking, so the gift is given anew each day. This is the day that God has made. We are fully present in it. So let us rejoice for God, our God, Emmanuel, is with us.