

“Yearning for God” First Sunday in Advent – 11/29/20 – Mark 12:24-37/B

As we have once again completed our year with the Gospel of Matthew and begun the story from Mark, let us pause to welcome in the New Year with prayer: **We praise you**, O God, for this circle of candles that mark our days of preparation for Christ’s advent. As we light the first candle for *Prophecy*, rouse us from sleep, that we may be ready to greet our Lord when he comes with all the saints and angels. Enlighten us with your grace, and prepare our hearts to welcome him with joy. Grant this through Christ our Lord, whose coming is certain and whose day draws ever more near. Amen.

Grace and peace to you from God, our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The 1st Sunday in Advent is a curiosity in that it marks two opposites at once; it is a time of looking *forward* to the return of Jesus in glory (what we call the Second Coming of Christ). At the same time as we are looking forward, we also *look back* at a world holding its breath for a divine child - the Son of Man and the Son of God - to be born in Bethlehem. So, we enter this season with the hope for new life in the future by recalling a time in the past - when God came “for us” in human form for the first time. Many nations for generations have looked to God’s return with foreboding, but those who believe in the abiding love, remember that first inbreaking, and yearn for Jesus’ presence among us again.

I can only remember one time in my life when I truly yearned for anything. I didn’t yearn for that one perfect Christmas present when I was a child. I never yearned for one true love - oh, not to be single and lonely, for sure - but before I learned to yearn for love, God brought the love of my life (well) *into* my life! I think I yearned for a singing career, but I never could figure out what my unique voice was, until I finally starting singing the liturgies in church.

Now, I know many of you have truly and deeply yearned in your lives. There are those who have been kept apart for long periods of time by military service, or job opportunities far away. There are those who yearn for children, or a home of their own, or that perfect vocation that gives their life meaning. There are some who have yearned to be with family from whom they are separated by illness, or incapacity, or incarceration. And some who yearn for loved ones lost too soon, who literally live day after day yearning with the expectant hope of a heavenly reunion.

The Bible tells many stories - and some folks who yearned for some very odd things - whilst journeying to the Promised Land, and being fed on manna, miraculous, heavenly food, some yearned for the leeks and cantaloupes that they ate while they were slaves in Egypt. Years later, the people of Israel would yearn for a political-religious leader like their ultimate King, David. Yearning, it seems, is part of our human condition, and there are different kinds of yearning for different times and seasons.

One such time is marked today. With a Thanksgiving celebration that made us homesick for previous years’ gatherings, we might have been surprised that the holiday turned out better than we had hoped. Food was prepared and shared, folks visited with family and friends at a safe distance or even on a screen. Love unexpressed seemed just too precious not to share right now, and the Festival of Gratitude spilled out around the country. The harvest has been safely gathered in, so that now we can lift our gaze to the behold the dawning of the Season of Advent.

Now, most of you know all the ins and outs of Advent - the traditions, the candles lighted one by one to mark the weeks left until Christmas - the anticipation and the waiting that we have become familiar with over the years. We close our front doors to the cold of winter beginning to blow in, and we start our rituals of preparing, of expecting, of hoping.

But this whole year seems to have been a long journey to get to this place, just to begin yet another journey. We *HAVE been* waiting, and watching, and preparing! But *our plans* fell through, and our lives turned upside down, and we wanted so very much to go back to normal - you know, back to that time when we had control of our lives - a time when we had very little for which to yearn.

Yet, all along the way (since that crazy Friday the 13th in March of 2020) when we knew we would be very smart to shut down our church building and do things differently - I have felt in my bones that God was *up to something* in the tragedy of this global pandemic. Out of the wrecked lives, the upheaval in our “normal”, there is a sense that we are moving toward something brand new - something filled with possibility. We are stronger for our flexibility and adapting, and we are beginning to uncover (or discover) something for which we were yearning but couldn’t quite put our finger on.

I think we were looking for Jesus.

The Second Coming of Christ - the end of time - is not something that we had thought about day to day - nor is it something we even preach or teach about in our church. We know that Jesus told us he would return, but until then, well, “we just won’t think about it.” Sort of what might happen when this pandemic abates and we try to return to the life we knew last year. Whether we believe it or not, that life has been changed forever. It might even be *gone* forever. Whether we believe it or not, Jesus *will* return, as Lord of all. Whether we believe it or not, we do not really control much of anything in our lives...do we?

There is something about control that we know isn’t rightfully ours. There is a strange dichotomy of being created in God’s image and yet not being God - “created co-creators” - saints and sinners - light and dark...they co-exist and enhance each other. Some might say, “*you can’t have one without the other...*” We have control, and yet we surrender control to God. “*When you don’t know what to do, go back to what you know to be true.*”

By the way, my one life experience of “yearning till it hurts?” It was the time before I let myself surrender to God’s call on my life. And I can tell you, when the yearning stops, the hard work of reality starts. But the hard work brings meaning, and joy and hope.

Living in response to a global pandemic that has not only changed the world’s trajectory, but has changed each of our individual lives far beyond what we could ever have thought possible, is a commentary, an interpretation of our relationship with God. Just one year ago, we might have heard the readings about Jesus’ return with uneasiness - asking

the question, “*Am I ready to be judged?*” or wondering why Jesus might need to come back into our worlds, which were mostly pretty much the way we had created them. I don’t think I ever had a conversation with someone who was looking forward to the end of things as they were; of us as we were.

But now, all that ***has changed***. And, our deepest yearnings are about to be fulfilled, for we are meeting God in a whole new way. Now we see a glimpse of something much, much greater – because there is so much more that God would have us do and be in our world as it groans with the birthpangs of a new age. People of Advent, we will be the midwives to the birth of something we might never have thought possible. With God’s help, we will not take our privilege and our good fortune for granted – claiming that we have accomplished it on our own. For now, we see things with new eyes – different eyes that have experienced real loss, and pain and suffering of our people. And those new eyes, my friends, are the eyes of God. The God who sees, who calls, who draws us forth in hope, who invites us into something new. A way of life that has been known for generations – lost and found again a thousand times – but always there to be rediscovered by those who wait.

Hope is ours. New Life is in God’s hands. And at this time of Advent we are reaching out to touch the face; the very fingertips of the Sovereign Creator of all that is and ever has been. We yearn to touch the hand of God that holds our new tomorrows. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “*Behold...I am doing a new thing, now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?*” People of Advent, is it possible that we might be part of the new thing for which the whole creation has been yearning? Amen.

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Resources: Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Steven Charleston, Online Facebook devotion;