

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 1, 2013
Advent 1
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 24:37-44

In some ways it seems hard to believe, but 2013 has come and gone, and we now find ourselves beginning the cycle of the church year once again. Unlike the civil calendar, the church marks time based on the life and story of Jesus.

The story begins with Advent, a word that means “coming.” Advent calls on us to prepare for Jesus’ coming, both as a baby born in Bethlehem and as the Lord of history who will judge the world and bring God’s reign in its fullness.

Some of you who have been at Epworth for a long time may be able to call to mind some of the important themes of the Advent season. Those themes include: **watchfulness, waiting, endurance, readiness, and preparedness.**

But on this first Sunday of Advent, I am faced with a daunting challenge as I stand before you. For 2,000 years, the church has been proclaiming the message: *Christ is coming again. Look up, get ready, for his return could happen at any moment.*

When you’ve been sounding a message for a long time, it can become very difficult to “keep it fresh,” to prevent it from becoming routine. It can become

very easy to simply “go through the motions,” to set the controls on “auto pilot” and go about life with a “business as usual” kind of mindset.

Do you see what I’m trying to say here? Can you appreciate the dilemma? For 2,000 years the church has been proclaiming, “Christ is coming – get yourselves ready and prepared.” I’ve been your pastor for almost 15 years, and for at least 14 years now I’ve stood here at this time of year and said to you: *Christ is coming. Get your hearts and lives in order.*

It’s no wonder that the scriptures often call on us to “wake up,” to rise up from our slumber, to stay alert and awake. The longer you wait for something to happen, the more difficult the waiting can become. It can be easy to lose focus, to grow weary and tired, to fall asleep. We think it’s difficult to wait for an hour in the doctor’s office, or for 45 minutes at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Try waiting for more than 2,000 years, and see what you think about that.

So, here we are again. It’s the first Sunday of Advent. And I’m faced with a problem, and wondering to myself: What can I possibly say to you that will keep this year’s celebration of Advent from becoming just another four weeks where I tell you all to prepare yourselves for Christ’s return? The scripture texts of Advent had a real “edge” to them when they were written. But after thousands of years, the “edge” can be worn off a little. Seriously: *how long can I keep telling you to scan the horizon?*

I don't honestly know the answer to that question.

I do know, from Matthew's Gospel, that a key feature of Jesus' return will be its *unexpected timing*. Jesus speaks of it here using the analogy of Noah and the great flood. In the days of Noah, people were busy living life, carrying on business as usual. Living life, getting married, raising children, working jobs, taking vacations. They had no idea what lay out ahead of them on the horizon. No idea that the flood was coming – until it arrived. Then many were swept away in judgment.

Jesus says that it will be like that when he returns again. Two men will be working in the fields, and one will be taken and swept away in judgment. Two women will be grinding at the mill, and one will be taken away in judgment. Oblivious to what is about to happen -- until it happens.

So, at the risk of sounding like I'm giving you the annual obligatory speech about the need for you to get your hearts and lives in order, let me just admonish you with the words of the apostle Paul: "Wake up, for the coming of our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."

In other words – *prepare*. Prepare your hearts, prepare your homes, prepare your lives for Christ's coming.

And what should our preparation look like? What does preparing for Christ's arrival look like dressed up in work clothes?

The apostle Paul tells us in his words to the church at Rome. The Apostle Paul answers for us in one simple word: LOVE. Love for God and love for others.

For Paul, preparation for Christ's return looks like *love in action*. Love so intense that it no longer has time for self-indulgence. Love so deep that it hungers to honor the commandments rather than violate them. Love so pervasive that our old ways of living -- ways of self-destruction -- are tossed away like old, dirty clothes. Love that has no room for bitterness and hatred. Love powerful enough to melt down weapons of war into plowshares.

Our days are numbered. Our time runs out. The truth of this Advent message comes to us this morning not to depress us or to make us fearful, but to challenge us to *love more fully*.

We are confronted with this truth this morning not to make us hang our heads in despair, but to lift them up with an alert gaze to see where our love is needed. You are here this morning, and the Spirit of God is saying to you, "Wake up!"

You are here today because the world you inhabit needs love that only you can give. You can give away your love and your life in tiny installments, but time is short, and you'll never be able to pay off your love-debt, so you might as well throw the doors of your heart wide open and just unleash it in full force.

Love has a lousy shelf-life. It needs to be taken down, used, expended. For that is what has happened to us. Love came down from heaven, was used, was poured out for us. Love died for us while we were yet sinners. Love led us back to the Father's house. Love looked beyond our fault and saw our need. Love refused to let our brokenness have the last word.

In this Advent season, that same love comes to us anew. It invites us to see things not only as they are, but to ponder what they might be, especially when touched by love.

As we come to the Table this morning, let us come with gratitude for the love that found us when we were far from home. And let us honor that love by going from this place and loving one another like there is no tomorrow. For who knows? One day -- perhaps today -- that *will* be the case.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.