

## First Sunday of Advent – A

“Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

A man bought a used suit of clothes at the Good Will Industry store. In one of the pockets he found a fifteen-year-old ticket for a shoe repair job. So, as a lark, the man decided to try to redeem the shoes. When he presented the ticket, the proprietor looked at it for a moment and then disappeared into the back room. A few moments later he reappeared, saying very calmly, “They’ll be ready next Tuesday.”

Time is an elusive commodity. We never seem to have enough of it. And it is even more so this time of the year, and the closer we get to Christmas, the less time we seem to have.

Today we begin the season of Advent, the beginning of a new year in our church calendar. And it is my job to stand here and tell you that we need to prepare for the coming of Christ. And you sit there and roll your eyes and think to yourself, “Oh please, don’t I have too many things to prepare for already? Couldn’t Jesus just surprise me? I just don’t have the time.” Of course you don’t. None of us do.

But Advent preparation is not like all the other preparation we do at this time of the year. It does not involve buying presents or even going to the mall. It does not involve signing Christmas cards or licking envelopes. It simply involves focusing on Christ. It involves priorities. It involves looking at things in a new way. It involves an attitude of expectation for what God can and will do. And when you are focused on Christ, when you begin to look at the world in this new way the busyness of our lives does seem the burden that we so often allow it to become.

At this time of the year we sometimes feel that we must do everything right now because there is so much more we must do in the next few weeks. Time seems to be closing in on us. But this morning’s readings all speak of a time that is still in the future, a time we must be ready for. Isaiah speaks of the end of warfare: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Isaiah spoke these words more than two and a half millennium ago, and yet we do not seem one bit closer to the time he spoke of. Alas, we seem to be getting further and further away. Swords and spears have been replaced not by tools of agriculture but by more advanced weapons of destruction. We seem to be getting further and further away from the message of peace.

But we will not see the coming of that time by reading the newspaper. We will not see the time Isaiah spoke of by studying world politics. There is nothing wrong with reading the paper or studying politics; they are good things to do. But we must never let world or local events, no matter how encouraging or discouraging distract us from our focus on Christ. He is our hope, our only hope. If we remain focused on him, we will be ready.

In our gospel reading, Jesus gives us a warning that we must be ready for his return because the day will not be known until it happens. He speaks of the

time of Noah as an example: "For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man."

Now we can safely say that Jesus approved of eating, drinking, and marriage. He certainly doesn't want us to stop eating, although he might be pleased if some of us like me did a little less of it. Throughout the gospel accounts he is constantly attending feasts and dinners and he even attended a wedding and spoke quite highly of the institution of marriage. He mentions these things not because he wants us to stop doing them. He mentions them because they represent all the necessary things we must do in our lives. He just doesn't want these ordinary necessary things to distract us from the extraordinary important things. If he was speaking to us this morning, he might substitute buying Christmas presents and Christmas trees and decorating our houses and preparing food for family and friends. And we can also say that he would approve of those things as well. He most definitely wants our Christmas celebrating to be centered on him. But even though much of the world is not willing to have a Christ centered Christmas, he certainly must approve of the joy with which his birth is celebrated. He just doesn't want our busyness to make us forget what is truly important. We are tempted to think that Jesus wants us to concentrate our thoughts on the future, but he never says that. Instead, we need to be ready for the future by living today in the expectation of what God can do.

The clock master was about to fix the pendulum of a clock, when to his surprise, he heard the pendulum speak. "Please sire, leave me alone," the pendulum pleaded. "It will be an act of kindness on your part. Think of the number of times I will have to tick day and night. So many times each minute, sixty minutes an hour, twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. For year upon year ... millions of ticks. I can't cope with it." But the clock master answered wisely, "Don't think of the future. Just do one tick at a time and you will enjoy every tick for the rest of your life." And that is exactly what the pendulum decided to do. It is still ticking merrily away. Jesus is not telling us to think of the future. He is telling us to be ready for the future. He is telling us to be aware of what is truly happening all around us right now.

When only nineteen-years-old, Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote these lines:

O God, I cried no dark disguise  
 Can e'er hereafter hide from me  
 Thy radiant identity!  
 Thou canst not move across the grass  
 But my quick eyes will see Thee pass...  
 I know the path that tells Thy way  
 Through the cool eve of every day;  
 God, I can push the grass apart  
 And lay my finger on Thy heart!

This is the awareness that Advent calls us to. This is the awareness that the world and our own cynical attitudes draw us away from. This is the attitude

that we need to recapture and keep in our hearts always. And if we can do that, then we will be ready. We will be ready for Christ when he returns.

The renowned Welsh poet Dylan Thomas became so cynical that his wonderful creative spirit dissipated through riotous living. At yet at an earlier stage in his life he could write:

...green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman,  
the calves sang to my horn,  
the foxes on the hills barked clear cold,  
And the sabbath rang slowly  
In the pebbles of the holy streams.

Few of us have quite the sense of enchantment with God's creation as Thomas displays in his poetry. But we all have at least a small ember of the childlike sense of awe with all that surrounds us created by God. Few of us have sunk to the disastrous level of cynicism that Thomas fell to. But virtually all adults have fallen at least a little, and most of us far more than that. All of us need to recapture that sense of the holy and the sacred that is our birthright as God's children created in his image.

Jesus said, "Unless you become like a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." Little children have such a wonderful expectation of who God is and what he will do. We need to recapture that sense of expectation.

A little girl sat at her grandmother's feet to listen to the creation story from the Book of Genesis. As the wondrous tale unfolded, the grandmother noticed that the child was unusually quiet. "Well, what do you think of it, dear?" she asked. "Oh, I love it," the child answered. "You never know what God is going to do next." We don't know what God is going to do next, but somehow we just assume that life will go on in the same old way. And so we miss it when God does act. We are not like Edna St. Vincent Millay who could see God at work and lay her finger on his heart. But we want to be like her. We need to be like her.

David Good thinks that Advent should be a time when we are up on our toes. This contrasts with Lent which is a time to be down on our knees. This is perhaps the big difference between Advent and Lent. Advent is often thought of as sort of a little Lent with just a lighter emphasis on repentance, but this is not so. Of course, we should always be ready to repent when we sin regardless of what season we are in, and Advent does have an aspect of self-evaluation that should lead to repentance. But I think we do Advent and ourselves a disservice when we think of it as merely a little Lent. It is a time of wondrous expectation - waiting for Christ to return as he promised, waiting for Jesus to come as a humble little child on Christmas, waiting for him to come into our hearts right now. Good is right. We should think of Advent as a time to be up on our toes.

Good makes a connection with verse fifteen of chapter three of Luke, which in the New English Version says: "The people were on the tiptoe of expectation." That is how we should be at this time of the year, "on the tiptoe of expectation." Good then goes on to say this: "Anyone who has ever taken part in any athletic activity knows how important it is to be always up on our toes. We're

leaning into the future. We're in a state of readiness and preparation. Our attention and all of our senses are on 'red alert.'"

He then offers an illustration using a retired missionary named Lou Ann Parsons. He describes her as "so short that when she stood in our pulpit, she could not see the congregation unless she stood on her tiptoes. As she read Scripture lessons, she was always on her toes." Good then draws this conclusion: "At the time, it occurred to me that this is how we all ought to read the Bible. Unless we are on our toes, actively looking for God's revelations, chances are we won't have any revelations. Whenever we read the Bible, a novel or a poem, or go to the movies to the theater, listen to music, or engage in conversation, we need to try to be up on our toes actively searching for God's revelation, always looking for the ways in which the beyond is in our midst, the sacred breaks through the walls of our profanity, the Spirit makes perfectly clear a truth we should have known a long time ago. Unless we are up on our tiptoes, we will miss these revelations."

A Sunday school teacher was telling the creation story to the youngsters in her class. "God fashioned the heavens and the earth, and He created man in His own image," she said. "The man's name was Adam, and God put him in the Garden of Eden. But he seemed to be lonely, so God decided to give Adam a wife. When Adam went to sleep, God took out a rib from his side and made it into a woman named Eve." After class, one of the little students had run hard all the way home and, as a result, felt a pain in his side. He went to his mother and said, "Gosh, mom, I think I'm going to have a wife."

Now that young man may have a little problem with application, but that is not serious and can be easily straightened out. The important thing is that he got the truth of the verse absolutely correct. He understood what the scripture was saying to him because he listened on his tiptoes. He had the expectation of God acting in a wonderful and unexpected way and he learned from it. I hope he was not too disappointed at not giving birth to a wife, but he can deal with that at a later time in his life when hopefully he is more able to take on that responsibility. The important thing is that he heard the scripture the way it is meant to be heard, with wondrous expectation.

Jesus calls us to be ready. He calls us to be ready for when he comes again as he promised. He calls us to be ready to celebrate the anniversary of his coming two thousand years ago. He calls us to be ready to allow him into our hearts right now, this very minute. And that is why we need to be up on our toes and wait with wondrous expectation.