

The meaning of Advent

If I had wished you all a happy new year at the December 1st service, you might have thought that I had gone crazy. Or at best had mistaken the first service of December for the end of December and that I was a bit early.

We have quite a few highly educated biblical scholars sitting in the pews here at St. Andrews, and I bet they all know what I would have meant by saying "Happy New Year" on December 1st.

The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the Christian calendar.

We work under many kinds of calendars. But for the purposes of preaching and marking the seasons of the Christian year, December 1st, the first Sunday of Advent is the first day of the Christian New Year. So, I should have taken a moment on December 1st to wish you all a Happy New Year and then again today.

So, what does Advent mean? What is Advent?

I wonder what kind of responses we might get from this congregation.

Some of you would say, "Well, it's the run-up to Christmas, the four weeks before Christmas Day." The wise heads among you might say it's a time of preparation for the celebration of the incarnation, which we celebrate on the twenty fifth of December. It is certainly a time for preparation in different ways: shopping, as we know, and parties and preparation for families gathering and celebrating Christmas.

My favorite preparation story is about a father who lived in Glasgow. One week before Christmas he calls his grown son who lives in London, and when he gets his son on the phone and says, "Son, your mother and I are getting a divorce." The son is surprised and says, "Dad, what are you talking about? You've been married for forty-five years, and you've been happy most of that time. What's brought this about?"

"Oh," the father says, "it's just been too long, and we're done with each other, so we're getting divorced." "Hold on," says the son, "I need to talk to my sister; don't do anything drastic."

So, the son calls his sister (who lived in Leeds) and says, “You won’t believe it. I just spoke to Dad, and he says that he and mom are getting a divorce.”

She responds with, “they most certainly are not.” “I’m going to call them right now. We should get ready to go there and stop this madness.” So, she calls her dad and says, “Don’t do anything. My brother and I are coming up, and we’ll be there next week.”

The father puts down the phone and shouts to his wife, “Are you there, dear? I’ve got good news: the kids are coming home for Christmas, and they’re paying their own way.”

Advent is a different kind of preparation. Advent means coming or arrival. We prepare for the arrival of our Lord in the baby born in Bethlehem. We know Jesus is coming. We know that we are preparing for the celebration of his birth.

We know all the words and themes about watching and waiting; we understand that. But the reality is we all know when Christmas is coming.

It’s not a secret; it’s the same every year. We know that we gathered right here, many of us, on Christmas Eve, and we sang the same old carols that tug at our heartstrings. We heard the familiar readings; we lit the Christ candle in the middle of the Advent wreath. And we went home to sleep and then opened presents on Christmas morning. It’s all quite familiar. So, what does the Advent piece mean?

I hope our scripture for today might give us a little shock, jolt us out of the familiarity of the season. Give us pause to come away from the shopping and the busyness we experienced this year, with words of suffering, of darkness, warnings of signs, and commands from Jesus. I hope it might help to reorient our understanding of what Advent is and how we might faithfully live through this season.

So, I think the first thing we should be clear about is that when we mark Advent, it is not only about the coming of our Christmas Day. It wasn’t just the counting down of the days until this December 25th.

In the Christian tradition, marking Advent is not just about the calendar year but about the deep promises of our faith, promises of hope and redemption and reconciliation for the world through Jesus Christ.

Advent is not just about the first coming of the baby in Bethlehem, but about what the tradition calls the second coming. And unless we begin our Advent with at least some sense of what that is or what that might be, we're not getting the full meaning of Advent.

That's why today when reflecting on Advent our texts are not focused on the Christmas story or preparing for the Christmas story in that sense, but are focusing on these words of Jesus, these warnings that Jesus gives to the disciples.

I want to be clear this morning that in reading these texts and in thinking about this that we are not focusing on the end of the world in a series of violent acts, whether that is ecological catastrophe or nuclear war.

Advent is about hope. About the promise of reconciliation, the promise of Emmanuel, the promise that God is with us. About the promise that God is with us in the baby born in the barn near Bethlehem and that God promises to be with us, calling us to new ways of living in our lives, challenging the old ways of doing things that are broken and hurtful and divisive for community and for the world.

And so there is a discipline to be undertaken in Advent. We don't perhaps think of that in the way we may think of Lent as having Lenten disciplines such as fasting or giving up things. We don't think about that so much in the holy season of Advent, but it's there in the text: "Be on guard, be alert."

Our Advent discipline is a discipline of watching and waiting. Watching for and waiting for the presence of Christ in our lives and in our world. Watching and waiting amid all that the world throws at us. It is about recognizing that the coming of Christ is transformational for our world and our lives. We're not pretending that things are not hard, or that there are not things to deal with.

It is about watching and waiting while recognizing the perils of economic downturn, facing personal tragedy or loss.

Advent lives amid that reality and in the promise that there is hope. I think the truth about Advent is that it is not just about the four weeks we partake in it, but that Advent is the place in which the church lives every Sunday, indeed every day of the year.

I think Advent is about what it means to be a church—to be the community that celebrates incarnation, that lives ministry, grieves death on the cross, and celebrates the resurrection.

Advent is what it means to be a church: to gather on a day like this, to take ourselves out of the stress of the shopping and marketers that are presented to use during those weeks.

This is true: for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him shall not die, but have everlasting life.

This is true: I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.

This is true: for unto us a child is born; to us a son is given in whom authority will rest and whose name will be the Prince of Peace.

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all people and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young people shall see visions, and your old folks shall dream dreams.

This is true: the hour comes, and it is now.

So, let us remember, as we prepare for a new year in the life as Christians to be on guard and be alert.

May God bless you with a safe, healthy, and joyous New Year. I am sending you well wishes and praying for you in the coming year!

May God bless your family with prosperity, good health, and happiness in the New Year and may he help you strengthen your bond with family and friends.

And as we hear from Romans 15:13, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Happy New Year. Amen.