

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Preparing for Advent”
By Eric Howell
Luke 21:25-36
November 29, 2009

Advent is about preparation and waiting, expectation and anticipation. We spend four Sundays preparing for what is to come. But what seems apparent is that this, the first Sunday of Advent, is about preparing for Advent. It's like preparation for the preparation. If Advent is the time between the times, between what was and what is to come, today seems almost like the time between the time between the times. It's sort of suspended out there.

Look around, the church calendar says it's Advent, but there are not many decorations yet . . . those get hung tonight.

The church calendar says it's Advent, but does this Sunday belong properly to a long Autumn Thanksgiving weekend in November or a Winter Advent/Christmas season in December?

And the scripture texts, particularly the reading from Luke, don't seem to fit the familiar Christmas story. Very little of what we read this morning is probably immediately familiar to most casual Bible readers. Next week, we return to the first few chapters of Luke, the great, epic, tender, tremulous stories of Mary and Joseph and Bethlehem and angels and announcements.

The soundtrack of those stories in our hearts is “Deck the Halls,” “Chestnuts Roasting Over an Open Fire,” “I'm dreaming of a White Christmas”—all those songs you'll be sick of in few weeks.

But those tunes seem out of place alongside today's Gospel reading. Today we are in the twenty-first chapter of Luke, reading words of an adult Jesus, who according to the church calendar hasn't even been born yet. And He's not talking about little babies and mangers.

What Jesus talks about is the destruction of Jerusalem and the overthrow of its people. The soundtrack to this passage is Metallica or maybe even that 80's hair band MegaDeath. Bing Crosby doesn't sing MegaDeath. Jesus is singing a warning song about what can happen in the world, explicitly in verse 20, “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee toward the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are the days of vengeance” These are harsh predictions, and they did come to pass. Maybe that's why Luke included all of this terrifying language in his gospel account of Jesus' life. What He said would happen did happen. Jesus might have said all this around the year 30 AD. Luke wrote his gospel around the year 90 AD. Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 70 AD. The time between the times Jesus said it and Luke recorded it. And Luke remembered. Who wouldn't?

The destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies in 70 AD was no small setback in the ongoing saga of the Jewish people in Palestine. It was a seminal moment.

The Jews revolted. The Romans came and crushed them, destroyed the temple, and dispersed the people. So when we read this text, we are in a sense looking forward with Jesus and looking back with Luke. See what I mean? In all sorts of ways it's a strange Sunday.

It's also an important Sunday for us. Though these events, whether you see them through the eyes of Jesus or read them through the pen of Luke, are far, far removed from our lives, what this all says is important for us.

We can follow Jesus' warnings as a cautionary tale spoken to us. Because what He says is not just about the particularities of Rome and Jerusalem (v. 33-36). The grandeur of the language carries the mind over the head of that particular crisis and to every crisis that confronts us and even over the head of every major event we have faced to the moment of singularity which is Christ's second coming. It is beyond doubt that the immediate meaning of Jesus' words was about the destruction of Jerusalem. It is beyond question that the ultimate meaning of Jesus' words is to Christ's final coming.

And this, as much as recreations or reimaginings of mangers and an inn with no room, is what Advent is about. Advent is a reminder that being a Christian is as much looking forward to what is to come as it is looking back as to what has already come. What has already come before us shapes us, forms us, and informs us to the character of the God we know and worship. It shapes our faith. What is to come shapes us and forms us, too. It shapes our hope. And we live pulled tight between faith and hope. It's the tension between our identity and our purpose, between who we are and what we are for. Between how we live and what we live for.

This, of course, is not peculiar to the season of Advent, but Advent is a good time to remember this in the oddness of liturgically looking forward to the birth of Jesus, which, of course, historically has already happened. What this means is that even this exercise of faith and hope does something in us that makes us more of the kind of Christians we are supposed to be.

I'm sure I've said it, and I know I've heard it said that Advent is a time of waiting. We wait for what is coming, or more specifically, who is coming. So, in our theological imaginations, we revisit the generations preceding Christ who waited for God's messiah to come; we journey with Mary and Joseph to wait for the baby to come; we consider our own generation as a time of waiting for Christ to return a second time. We talk about Advent as a time of waiting.

But I'm starting to think that's not enough and that that's not what Advent really means. Or maybe better said, spiritual waiting isn't as passive as it might be suggested by saying that we wait.

For example, I know someone who was looking for a job, really a career. And so this person positioned himself theologically that he was going to wait for God to make it clear what he was to do. He would just sit and wait. And he did. And didn't do an internship . . . and waited . . . and didn't send out resumes . . . and waited . . . and didn't volunteer in his area of interest . . . and waited . . . he wasn't proactive in any way toward a vocation, a career, or even a job. It seems that he chose procrastination and delay, baptized as waiting. And today . . . still waiting . . . still waiting for a star to shine in the

sky and God's voice to cry out to reveal the direction he should take. Spiritual waiting is not this passive.

There is a time for sitting still and being open to God's word and God's voice. But all of you know who have tried to pray, especially tried to pray through *lectio divina*, tried to sit in silence to hear God, prayer is hard work—it may be the hardest work we do. It takes discipline and patient struggle sometimes to sit and be purposefully open to God's word. Spiritual growth and formation are hard work, too. You show me someone who is a spiritual giant, and I'll show you someone who sweated through times of prayer when they felt like their prayers were unanswered at best and bounced off the ceiling more nights than they can count. Spirituality is hard work. The same is true for marriage. Show me a good marriage, and I'll show you two people who really worked at it. They didn't just wait for things to get better—they did whatever was in their power to make things the best they could make them.

I'm not sure passive waiting works for career development, marriage enrichment, or spiritual growth. I'm also not sure that it's completely the right word for what Advent is about.

John Paul II, the late Pope, said this about Advent:

Advent helps us to understand the fullness of the value and meaning of the mystery of Christmas. It is not just about commemorating the historical event; which occurred some 2000 years ago in a little village in Judea. Instead, we must understand that our whole life should be an 'advent,' in vigilant expectation of Christ's final coming. To prepare our hearts to welcome the Lord, who, as we say in the Creed, will come one day to judge the living and the dead, we must learn to recognize his presence in the events of daily life. Advent then is a period of intense training that directs us decisively to the One who has already come, who will come, and who continually comes.

Did you catch that? Advent is a period of intense training . . . that directs us decisively to the One who has already come, who will come, and who continually comes.

So if Advent is a time of training and preparation, then it's not just about counting down the days until Christmas. As a kid, I remember the Advent wall-hanging calendar that had little pockets for every day of December. And in each pocket was a red and white mint. All those mints were right in front of me every day, free for the taking. But each had its place and time. The joy of the mint was in the sweetness of the candy, but also in the daily reward for patience and anticipation. Train your kids to learn patience and discipline with advent mints or candles, and you might just develop their character.

Think of it like an engaged couple getting ready to get married. A wise couple will not think of the engagement as just the countdown to be endured until the wedding day. A wise couple will use their engagement as a period of discovery, of discussion, and of decision. Relationship work is happening between them even as they order the cake and send out the invitations and wait, even impatiently, for what God has given to marriage. Couples who learn they can trust themselves and one another to be disciplined prior to marriage are couples who are more likely to be able to trust one another after the wedding. The engagement is a training ground. I look back at my long-distance engagement to my wife as one of the most formative times in our relationship. I was in

Florida; she in Texas. We dated by letters and a weekly phone call and this new thing called email. We learned to talk and we talked about what kind of marriage we wanted to have, and how to spend and save money, and how to spend and value time, and what kind of husband I wanted to be and what kind of wife she wanted to be, and we talked about our parents and where we would spend Thanksgivings and Christmases. But more importantly, we talked about how we would talk about those kinds of decisions when they came up over the years.

What happened was more than the sum total of decisions made about what we would do. What happened was that we were beginning to be changed as we looked forward with seriousness and serious naïveté to the life we were about to, gulp, share together. We were in the Advent of our lives together and the big day was coming. We were getting ready.

The person who lives in expectation and preparation of Christ is a person who lives with increasing purposefulness and intentionality. In light of Jesus' warning to not be weighed down by dissipation, this seems quite important. The way Father Alfred Delp puts it is like this, "Advent is a time for rousing." Without the rousing, the stirring of our souls, the desire to pursue the life of Christ with dedication and self-reflection, we are likely to fall prey—in not just our spirits, also our relationships, our vocations to dissipation—that very fallen condition of becoming far less than we are created to be.

The thing is that over the next few weeks, a lot of us will be doing a lot of 'getting ready'—you may have already started. No other month in American life is so much time and energy spent by so many people preparing for something that is upcoming. Early Friday morning my father-in-law in San Antonio woke me up at 6:00 a.m., the morning after turkey, pie (and the Aggie game that kept me up half the night wondering what could have been). We got up to go play golf. We had a tee time at 7:15 a.m. We left the house at 6:20 a.m. After a brief stop at 7-11 for a cup of coffee, we headed down the highway. It was pitch black dark. And it was cold. Real cold. I thought I should have worn a ski bib rather than golf clothes. As I was clutching my hot coffee down the highway, I looked over and there was a Wal-Mart, and every parking space from the door to the road had a car in it. At 6:30 a.m. in the morning. I said, "Look at that. Wow. Can you believe all those people are up this early—to shop! People will do anything." The irony hit me that I was also up in the dark and cold. At least those people were in a warm building.

A lot of people will spend a lot of time and money at places like Wal-Mart to buy presents to wrap and give to someone they love; and lots of people will buy ingredients from grocery stores to make pecan pies and cookies to serve to their families and friends. And lots of people will get ready with decorations and travel plans and all sorts of ways to get ready for Christmas. No doubt this is a time of preparation.

And despite the temptation to overindulge, overspend, and exhaust ourselves, there is good here in the preparation for something special. But let us let it do a deeper work in us—a spiritual work. May our minds and hearts be carried over the head of this particular season with its particular plans to be the kind of people who live lives of anticipation and preparation for what is to come—or more particularly—for the One who is to come again.