

SLD11.28.10 1st Sunday of Advent
Matthew 24:36-44
Emory Presbyterian Church
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Waiting and Watching with Advent Eyes”

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new liturgical, or church worship, calendar. Today we start again from the beginning. The beginning of time as measured through the Word of God, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came into being. The beginning of the gospels as they appear in scripture, since now we shift from focusing on Luke to the gospel of Matthew. And the beginning of – or really right *before* the beginning of – Jesus’s life on earth.

Today we start back at the beginning of what we believe: that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ that we might know God, understand God, learn from God, and be made whole in God.

Only knowing God, understanding God, learning from God, and being made whole in God is not, as most of us are painfully aware, as simple as it sounds. Truth is, what we believe as Christians takes a while to grasp. Or, to be grasped by. At least a lifetime. Maybe more.

So most of the time we don’t rely that much on what we already know or grasp about God, so much as we do on what we hope for, what we look for, what we understand to be God’s *promises* to us. Getting to know God seems less contingent on our personal observations or expectations of God than on our openness to God to showing up however and whenever God pleases. It’s not so much the observable arrival or intervention of God that determines what we believe as it is the *anticipation* of it. The beginning of faith’s wisdom is not seeing and interpreting the handwriting on the

wall so much as its expectant scanning for the mysterious messages God continually writes on the quotidian of our lives. It happens by preparing ourselves to stay open to whatever nutty gospel truths happen to be heading our way.

The beginning of worship in the church, as in our personal spiritual journeys, is not, despite its many highly managed rituals and traditions, Christmas Day, but in the preparation of ourselves to perceive, and receive, God, whenever and however God chooses to become Emmanuel, God-with-us. Therefore, the new year in the church doesn't begin with the birth of the Christ child; but with a season of preparation for the impossible breaking in of God into human flesh. Today marks the beginning of the season of Advent, during which time you and I prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus Christ.

Now, I know that, like children eager to open the presents under the tree, we're impatient to get on with our favorite carols and decorations and wassail that accompany what we invariably call the "Christmas season." I mean, who wants to pause and reflect when there are parties to go to? Presents to wrap? Stockings to stuff?

Advent is often viewed as something of a buzz kill. There are huge tensions between the demands for getting ready for Christmas and the demands for getting ready for the Christ child. Tensions reflected in a rather baldly convicting sort of way in the image on the front of today's bulletin, which shows a sort of Mexican stand-off between a modern woman doing her best to get everything organized for Christmas, and a wise person on a camel who's following a different star than the one on the Macy's logo.

They're going in opposite directions, these two, and both seem determined to get where they're going, though neither has yet. We might even say they're in each other's way. And so...what next? Who moves? Who gets out of the other's way? Which one reaches their goal?

The image does not tell us. There's no resolution in it, no peace, no clear next step to the impasse between shopper and seeker, just a sort of *détente*, a frozen moment of conflict, leaving unanswered the question of which will rule.

With which character in the image do you most identify?

I'd say most of us are pushing that cart, or fixin' to. But a lot of us are riding that camel, too. In fact, many of us are probably trying to do both. Which will dominate for each of us this season, the secular or the sacred? Which will rule, which will demand the most of our time and energy and attention? The needling challenge of the image remains unresolved.

The image of the shopper and the seeker was produced by an initiative called **The Advent Conspiracy**, described as "an international movement restoring the scandal of Christmas by substituting compassion for consumption." You can guess which figure in their image the Advent Conspiracy is rooting for.

The Advent Conspiracy's actually been around a while but I only stumbled across it last year. Founded in 2006 by three pastors described as "next generation church leaders," which I take to mean young and feisty, the Advent Conspiracy was created to help Christians shift the focus of Christmas from receiving to giving, to give presents of

presence instead of material things, and to – as stated on the insider of the bulletin cover – Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More and Love All.¹

The imaginative logo and intent of the Advent Conspiracy movement expanded quickly all over the world and is now represented by a very snappy website with all manner of excellent and free resources to help faith communities to redirect their giving to address suffering around the world, something our Mission Ministry has already led us in doing, not just with the Alternative Christmas Giving Tree but all year ‘round with local, national and international opportunities to join Christ’s work in the world.

Still, given the logo/motto/by line/bottom line kind of culture we live in, I decided this year to borrow the Advent Conspiracy’s provocative image both to help us look directly at the competing tensions of the season, and perhaps to choose which image we’ll root for ourselves. At the very least, we could do worse this Advent season than making a stab at Spending Less, Giving More, Loving All, and Worshipping Fully the unexpected gift to us of God’s Kingdom in the form of an innocent, vulnerable baby. 2,000 years ago God’s kingdom arrived in the unlikely mini-God/person of a star-crossed baby. Just as God’s kingdom keeps showing up in the mini births and deaths of our lives today.

There’s no predicting when or where or even if the kingdom will make an appearance. “About that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven,” Matthew reminds us. But for whoever keeps a lookout, those kingdom moments keep coming, keep surprising, keep sparking new divine possibilities.

Only it’s hard to stay on active alert all the time, to stay awake, vigilant, on the lookout for fleeting signs of God’s Kingdom. All this waiting around, all these

¹ <http://www.pursuantgroup.com/leadnet/advance/oct08s1a.htm>

distractions, all these competing demands on our time and attention.... It's always been a challenge waiting around for God's Kingdom to come; always been hard to keep one's Advent eyes from crossing in weariness or distraction.

You and I get impatient waiting weeks for the Christ child to be born. But some people of God waited for *centuries*.²

Let's listen to what waiting was like for some of them. First, we'll hear from the Mother Mary:

Mary: "Soon the baby is due, I can tell. It's all so hard to believe....There are days when I'm not at all sure that there really was a message or a vision.

Joseph is a good man; so many other men would have put me away. But what does all of this mean? All I really want is a baby, not a king or a messiah. God, I have so many questions, so many fears. And the time is so short!

And today's mothers, what are *they* waiting for?

Today's Mother: Goodness! There are only 4 more weeks until Christmas. I've got cards and gifts to send, and I haven't even started baking or thought about Christmas dinner! I know Sam wants a certain Bakugan Gundalian Invader for his collection but I can't find it anywhere. And Sophia wants another German soccer jersey; that'll make three. Oh well, if that's what she wants. And Brandon, who knows what *he* wants...teenagers are so difficult to buy for. Whatever it is, I know it'll cost a fortune. What with all the get-togethers and concerts and special events at school, I don't know how we'll ever be ready by the 25th! The time is so short!

² *Worship for All Seasons*, Vol. 1, ed. By Thomas Harding, The United Church Publishing House, 1993, pp. 19-21/

Let's hear what waiting might have been like for a young, first century shepherd boy:

“Another night out here by myself. Sometimes I get so lonely, I'd sell the whole flock for a night in town. I don't know what's worse, the nights by myself or the days listening to all those old men talking about some coming messiah. What difference would it really make to me? I'd still be poor, and I'd still be stuck out in this field every night.”

Or a young person today:

Young Person: “Why do schools have exams before Christmas? I'm sure it's so nobody can get too excited about the holidays. I'll be so glad when they're over; then I can shop. But I'll need to get more money. Maybe babysitting. I sure hope Mom gets me that leather jacket I like. I've certainly dropped enough hints.

Or an ancient wise person. What would waiting have been like for a wise person 2,000 years ago?

Wise Person: “Wars and famines, plagues and pestilence, young people with no purpose, no initiative, brother warding against brother, people sacrificed to the whim of one man's evil power. How long, O Lord of the universe, will you leave your people like this? These are dangerous times, times of desperation and need. It seems to me the world cannot continue this way much longer. Surely God will send One to bring a new way, a way of peace, a way of hope. Surely, the time is ripe!

Let's hear from a wise person today:

Senior: “Another holiday season, more memories. I look into the faces of children and see such excitement and joy. I watch them hurriedly grow into teenagers who are so sure. Then they become harried parents, always fretting about money, always trying to do so much. And when they become old like me, they wonder, “Now what was that all about?”

“Christmas is such a bitter-sweet time. The memories of Christmases past can really hurt, and yet they were so happy! I miss my friends and family, yet Christmas opens up so many old wounds. Thank goodness the coming One showed us how to live and love through all that hurt.”

Sounds like waiting is always tough. But waiting and watching with Advent eyes means seeing what is...what's to be lamented, what's to be grieved, what's to be praised, what's to be grateful for...but also watching for what *might* be, what God promises us *can* be. God's Kingdom can be counted on to show up unexpectedly; can we be counted on to stay alert for it, to notice the hints, follow the clues, of what God keeps sending?

In Jesus Christ, God's Kingdom came. In Jesus Christ, God's Kingdom comes. How will you and I prepare ourselves for the coming Christ? What sort of prenatal care do we need to practice in order for Christ to be born alive and well in and among us? How about we conspire to help one another to slow down and step occasionally outside the frenzy of the season. How about we give each other a hand holding back the competing demands of the season long enough to scan the landscape of our lives for Kingdom glimpses.

I know. How about we cook up a conspiracy to help each other wait and watch for Christ with Advent eyes. We could call it, say, our Advent Conspiracy! And through it we could help one look with Advent eyes at whatever gospel truths and kingdom moments happen to be heading our way. You know...help each other be ready for that unexpected hour when the Son of Man is coming.

An EPC Advent Conspiracy. What do you think?

I'd be game. How about you? To the glory of God. Amen.