

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardiner  
The First Sunday of Advent (C)  
Sunday, December 2, 2018

*Jeremiah 33:14-16 | Psalm 25:1-9*  
*Thessalonians 3:9-13 | Luke 21:25-36*

*The season of Advent is a brand new beginning to a time where we can dare to hope for the God who loves us... to know us, and, if we're lucky, to help us love and know Him right back.*

Happy New Year!

It seems funny to say that now as we are winding up our year but for Christians, today is a new beginning.

Today is the first day of Advent and the first day of our brand new church year.

You can tell, of course, by the changes you see in the church:

The Advent Wreath  
The purple hangings on the altar and the pulpit and lectern  
The absence of flowers but replaced with gentle greens

You will also notice we added some prayers and will even change our prayer around communion just a bit.

And you know my favorite question to ask when there are changes is... WHY.

Let's start with Why Advent?

The English word Advent comes from a Latin word that means "coming."

Just as Christians would use Lent to prepare for Easter, Advent was used to prepare for Christmas.

We remember Christmas, right?

Shopping.  
Baking.  
Parties.  
Cookies.  
Santa.  
Cards.  
Gifts.  
Decorating.

But over time it evolved into a double meaning:

The first coming of Christ as a baby born of a woman  
AND

The second coming of Christ at the end of time.

It was made a special season of expectation and anticipation.

Which is why Advent isn't Lent.

When I was newly ordained, I was so enthralled with the idea of Advent being a "penitential" season, I almost walked around in sackcloth and ashes.

I would feel guilty about any of my Christmas preparations.

I would find myself making excuses for being happy, or singing Christmas carols and making cookies.

I even preached a sermon on how we should be more intentional during this "penitential time".

But I was wrong.

Lent is more of a spring cleaning of our lives.

Advent is more a cozier, getting your home ready to welcome a special guest kind of time.

It is a time to notice God breaking into our lives in all moments, all places, all times.

Past.

Future.

And even right now.

So if the question is why Advent - the answer is Hope.

Real, palpable, hope.

Like when Jesus was born...

It was both anticipated by the Jewish nation and also totally unexpected.

Think of it this way...

Imagine something really important...

Now imagine every story you've ever heard and every song you've ever sung mentions this wish.

Imagine that this dream of yours is not just your dream but the dream of an entire nation.

Consider what it would be like if everyone – your parents and grandparents and great grandparents; your friends; your lover; your great leaders had this exact dream.

Try, just for a minute, to imagine that the most important, most foundational teachings of your life were also about this dream of yours.

It would be as if the Archives and the National Gallery and the Natural History Museum and all the newspapers and books, Internet and social media talked about, housed, displayed, wrote about, remembered, worked toward YOUR WISH.

And now, imagine that your dream, your wish, was also a prayer.

It was a prayer you pray every single day.

It was a prayer you sing when you get up and when you go to sleep.

You might even say this prayer in the shower and when you were stuck in traffic on your way to work or when you find yourself in tough times.

This exact same prayer is the prayer you, and your family, and your friends, and your neighbors would pray day after day, year after year, decade after decade, generation after generation.

And then, one day, it comes true.

Imagine that one day came when God made your dream, and the dream of everyone important to you, come true.

That is what happened when Jesus was born.

And that is why we remember his birth more than 2000 years ago.

Because we could just focus on his ministry.

Or we could just remember his death on the cross and his resurrection.

But we remember his birth because it was a dream come true.

We also look toward the future during Advent.

We dream about when Jesus will come again and the whole world will know God's love and redemption.

If you listen closely, you can hear courage and hope embedded in today's gospel.

Here is another translation:

25-26 "It will seem like total chaos—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea—all in an uproar and everyone in a panic.

27-28 "And then—then!—they'll see the Son of Man welcomed —a glorious welcome! When this happens, get up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high!"

We could easily miss this promise in the midst of fainting and roaring and foreboding.

But it is a promise his disciples would have never missed.

Jesus is helping his very Jewish disciples remember that their great prophets – Ezekiel, Isaiah, Nehemiah, and, of course, Jeremiah – talked about this over and over again in their prayers over generations.

Every word is packed full of meaning.

As Luke tell us, this is so obvious no one would miss it – just as you would never miss the sign of a tree telling you summer is coming.

Jesus tells them not to brush this off: I'm not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too—these things will happen.

If Jesus were talking to them today he might say, “But be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it's going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don't miss it.

Pray that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that's coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man.”

But we live between these two big moments of God's intervention in the world: between the coming of God in the flesh of Jesus as a baby born of a woman and the coming of Christ in glory.

And that is why we need Advent.

Because we are asked to live in the both/and world.

And Advent gives us a chance to hold a both/and kind of life together:

Life and death  
Light and darkness  
Judgment and forgiveness  
Longing and fulfillment

If you read what Tim wrote in his Rector's Letter in the Courier, or what Elizabeth Keeler wrote in her Reflection on Advent, you can see this tension isn't new nor is it to be avoided.

That is why I think we've been given a real gift this year with Luke's gospel.

As we enter this New Year, we get to spend some time with Luke.

He was a Gentile, just like us.

He wasn't raised in the Temple.

He didn't have the Hebrew Scriptures memorized.

He didn't pray the Shema twice a day.

But he did know a world where Jesus, the Christ, lived a life dedicated and devoted to making the here and now a better place.

Luke believed Jesus was for all – without distinction.

And that is why I think this Advent, we can spend some time breaking open our hearts and our minds to welcome Jesus.

Jesus the baby in a manger.

Jesus the overturner of the money changer's tables.

Jesus the one who welcomed sinners, children, tax collectors, women, and all the oppressed.

Jesus who was courageous beyond belief.

Jesus who lived a life serving others – not being served.

Jesus who turned the world upside down.

The same person who, without an army, without authority, without status, changed the world.

Jesus who will come again in power and great glory.

So if we remember the Jesus of the past and we wait for the Jesus who will come again, how do we live like Jesus in the meantime?

That is why we need Advent.

Can you spend these next four weeks looking deep into yourself and wondering how God can use you?

Can you hear God whispering to you?

Can you feel God strengthening your heart?

Is there a prayer you want to pray?

Because, remember, those prayers the Israelites prayed over and over again, came true.

As Bishop Mariann said this week, "when we allow our dreams to surface, we realize that no matter how hard we try to keep our expectations in check, hope is never far from us.

And thank God for that.

Because then we are open to what God alone can do, what God is doing, where God's grace prevails."

I invite you to hope and dream and pray these next four weeks of Advent.

To live in the meantime.

Remembering the past.

Longing for the future.

And living in the hope of today.

*The season of Advent is a brand new beginning where we can dare to hope for the God who loves us... to know us, and, if we're lucky, to help us love and know Him right back.*

Happy New Year.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Resources: the Rev. David Lose; the Right Rev. Mariann Budde; The Bible Project; Vikki Black's Welcome to the Church Year: An Introduction to the Seasons of the Episcopal Church, 2004.