

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. Advent comes from the Latin word which means “coming.” Advent is the season of preparing ourselves for the coming of the Christ Child. We begin a season that is familiar to many. It is like a favorite movie that we have seen over and over again. We can recite our favorite lines, chuckle in anticipation of an upcoming funny scene, cringe in knowledge of what is going to happen next, or begin to tear up at those moments always seem to tug at our heartstrings.

As Theresa Cho, a Presbyterian pastor, suggests, if the story of the birth of Christ is our favorite movie, then today’s Scripture reads like the movie trailer. Imagine the voice-over setting the scene: “In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won’t give its light...” The camera pans over to a fig tree that is beginning to sprout new branches, shoots, and leaves. The voice over continues, “...but nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows.” The trailer ends, “Watch out! Stay alert!” The trailer shades this familiar birth story of cute sheep, wise men with gifts, holy angels, and curious shepherds into a suspenseful, action-filled, ominous plot titled “Advent Apocalypse.”

Many would probably wish this rather scary reading was a trailer to Christmas, in the original understanding of that word. I have often wondered why we call movie previews trailers for the trailers are shown before the movie. Originally, trailers were shown at the end of the feature movie screening. That practice did not last long because the patrons would leave the movie after the feature film ended, but that name

has stuck. There may be some who would hope this passage was a trailer to Christmas, like the Sunday after Christmas, when hardly anybody comes to church. We have been to church already that week, so why go twice in one week? Why not read the gloomy passage that Sunday? Why hear this story now? The Christmas story read in this way is a far cry from the G-rated, warm-fuzzies version we tell our children. How does this trailer affect the way we enter Advent, a season known for expectation, preparation, and waiting? Are we merely waiting for baby Jesus to be born, or are we waiting for something more? This trailer does not reveal the release date of this movie. It can arrive at any time, so constantly check your listings! As Rev. Cho suggests, "Stay tuned!"

And so, we wait. We wait for the next coming of Christ. However, we are not good at waiting, are we? Some of you may remember ordering Christmas gifts from the Sears catalog. Pages on which to place our order were usually located in the back. You would fill in your name and address, list the items you wanted, include any necessary items such as color or size. The weight of each item was included in the catalog, so you would add up all the weight to add in the shipping costs. Then you would total the order, include the check, and put it in the mail. You would patiently wait and a few weeks later, your order arrived by US Postal Service. Now, we get on our computers, place the order online, within seconds we get our receipt. Amazon will deliver it the next day with FedEx, and if you are luck enough live where it is available, Amazon will deliver in two hours. As Doug McIntyre, a columnist on dailynews.com wrote, "We want what we want when we want it and we want it now!" We are impatient people and if you don't believe it, ask Ramona how impatient I can be! As children, we were taught by our parents to be patient. We tell our children to be patient. As we put their presents under the tree, our

children may plead, “Can I open it now?” as though it will be the end of the world if they don’t. We tell our children they have to be patient. But—parents you may want to cover your children’s ears—Advent tells us not to be patient!

Advent waiting is impatient. Advent waiting does not mean sitting around and waiting for Jesus to come again. Ours is not a “do-little” and “sit-more” faith. John Donahue, in Harper’s Bible Commentary, tells us that this text gives us the “proper posture toward the end of time” and that posture is “vigilance and fidelity (active waiting), not idle speculation.” Advent waiting is impatient waiting for there is no time for patience or complacency. There is no time for idle speculation and complacency that is characteristic of popular apocalyptic thinking today, the kind of apocalyptic thinking found in Hal Lindsay’s book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the *Left Behind* series of books, and the bumper stickers that read “In case of rapture, this car will be driverless.” One of the major problems with those who hold on to this thinking is “apocalyptic escapism.” The thinking goes like this, If Jesus is coming soon, if the destruction depicted in this apocalyptic thinking is going to be so horrifying and intense, why bother building a better world. One extreme example of this bad theology is one pastor who is alleged to have urged his congregation to do all they could to degrade the environment in order to hasten the return of Christ! One Interior Secretary believed that Christians need not be concerned about the environment for Jesus was coming soon!

Now is not a time for complacency and speculation. Advent waiting is impatient. Be busy with what Jesus has called you to do. Be impatient while you wait for Jesus. Jesus instructed us to love our neighbors. Dennis Sanders, a Disciples of Christ pastor in Minnesota, tells of an elderly woman who attended the church he was serving. She

was more comfortable attending a smaller church. Not long after she started attending, her only son died of cancer. Several members of the church took time to attend the funeral service. They didn't really know this woman very well, but they went anyway. Rev. Sanders wrote, "I saw something amazing: in that moment where her world ended, the members of the church became the hands and feet of Christ to her, someone they barely knew." While we as a nation are becoming more and more divided, we as individuals know our neighbors less and less. Loving our neighbors can be as non-controversial spread from raking the leaves for the elderly couple down the street, to delivering Meals on Wheels, to advocating for a fair and just tax law

We can wait impatiently for we live with hope and expectation that the Lord is near. We don't believe God is going to destroy everything. God will create a new heaven and a new earth. That is the "so what" of these clouds and trumpets and falling stars and fig trees about to sprout. We know whose we are. We know whose future is sure. We know who the potter is and that we are the clay. We know that the world is about to turn and the direction in which it will surely go. Advent is a past tense and future tense coming. We are assured by the past when God came to be one of us and live among us in the son Jesus Christ the Lord, in that first Christmas. That past makes it possible for us to look to the future. Because Jesus came, we live with the hope and expectation that Jesus will come again. We know that we are to turn in that direction too, if we are to be found on the side of the One who comes to set the captives free and are to bring good news to the poor. Advent is a time of renewing our hope.

Now to the God of all wisdom,
who strengthens us according to the gospel,
through Jesus Christ be all glory forever. Amen.