

SERVANT ADVENT SERIES — 2018

The Once and Future Coming of Christ “Waiting and Hastening”¹

II Peter 3:11-18

I never fail to be moved by the poetry of Charles Wesley set to music, and “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus” is in my top 5 all-time favorites. We should sing it, not just during Advent and Christmas, but all the year around:

Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

(Charles Wesley, 1744 – *UMH*, p.196).

It is our natural tendency as Western Christians to read this as personal in the sense of individual (remember our lesson last Sunday?), but look at lines 5-8:

Israel's strength and consolation, Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart.

¹ In its essential content, this Advent Lesson has its origins in a sermon preached by The Revd. Fleming Rutledge on the Second Sunday of Advent (1999) at Saint Michael and Saint George Episcopal Church in Saint Louis, Missouri.

When I first went to Europe to live at age 17, I was needless to say “in deep culture shock.” Holland is not East Texas, and I do not mean the flatland polders around Amsterdam in contrast to the hills and pine trees. From living also in Germany, Switzerland, and England and traveling extensively in Southern Europe, I learned that we Americans have a characteristic disposition quite different than most any European.

We are, as a general rule, “people of action.” We do not typically take long lunches like the French. I learned that in France when you eat and pay for lunch, you have bought the table to linger as long as you like. The meal is a social occasion. Unless it is a 3-Martini lunch with our favorite lobbyist, we do not linger at lunch. But notice, when we do linger over lunch, it is because it is a ‘working lunch.’ We are a people on the move getting things accomplished. Unlike the Swiss, a lot of us do not stand at the crosswalk and wait for the light to change. Seen a driver run thru a yellow-turned red light recently? Ruth Ann’s brother, Bill, was fond of saying, “We are burning daylight.” In other words, if the sun is up and we are just sitting there drinking a leisurely cup of coffee, we are wasting time. We need to be on the job.

Last week we discovered deep reasons as to why Advent is hard for us. Advent is about Watching and Waiting, and at some cultural levels for us, this sounds a false note. We are not comfortable sitting around watching and waiting. We want to speed things up; we must move things along. God is moving too slowly; we have been waiting 2000 years already. If God is not going to “bring in the Kingdom,” we will bring it ourselves. That is the American Way.

All kidding aside, in 2018 we need to ask ourselves seriously, what are we going to do with this tiresome Advent refrain about watching and waiting. In

traditional Advent liturgies that stretch over several weeks, we hear that The Bridegroom has been delayed and the wise and foolish virgins are waiting. In the Parable of the Talents, the servants are waiting for their master to return. And just how long have we been waiting for the last judgment when the promise of Christmas will be fulfilled? Advent is not just about the first coming in Bethlehem, because in the Biblical narrative that first coming can never be separated from the Second Coming.

Actually, to what extent do we any longer take the anticipation of the Second Coming with utmost seriousness? We say, “Yes, we do!”, but to what extent is this mostly lip service to what we were taught in Sunday School. [Here, I am really speaking of Baptist Sunday School where lots of time was spent on learning the Bible as literally true.] Here, I am confessing, and I am not convinced that this confession is good for my soul. It is certainly not good for my reputation as an evangelical theologian.

This first part of my confession is mostly harmless: I am an urban and perhaps even urbane Christian just like a lot of people in our society. The second part of the confession is more tricky: Do I really believe that Jesus is coming back . . . not just coming one by one to individual souls in their own hearts. No, I am asking the full-throated Biblical question: Do I really believe that Jesus will come to call the entire cosmos into judgment? Coming to bring history as we know it to a close? Coming to bring his everlasting kingdom to pass? That is what the New Testament sets before us – not a private, individualized, spiritualized coming . . . but actually a coming cosmic event that will be visible to everyone!? In another Charles Wesley hymn that we quoted last week (“Lo, He Comes with Clouds

Descending” – 1758, *UMH*, p. 718): ***Every eye will now behold him, robed in dreadful majesty.***

This claim the Church makes is too serious to fool around with. If we do not mean it, we should put an end to Advent liturgies. Actually, a lot of contemporary worship churches are doing away with Advent observation and settling for the romantic Jesus in a manger. And while we are at it, should shorten the Apostles’ Creed and leave out the line: “He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.” We could, of course, just omit the Apostles’ Creed altogether.

Our text for today from II Peter helps us to realize that we are not the first Christians to ask the questions related to “how long, O Lord, how long”? Why has so much time gone by? What has Christ not returned as promised? Is he really going to come back? Isn’t the creation just going to continue to rock along on its on? Read II Pet. 3:3-4). The Bible promises but offers no proof of any of this, and the entire apparatus of modern science would seem to undermine it so conclusively that we would be fools to go on believing it. It is “totally unbelievable.”

The book of II Peter is not an easy read but listen to II Peter 1:16: “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitness of his majesty.” Eyewitness to the majesty of God. When we indwell the Christian Scriptures and they come to indwell us, our perspective changes. There is something different about the tone of the New Testament witness, something out of the ordinary. These men and women were staking their very lives, literally, on something that had been seen and corroborated by a large number of witness whom they, in turn, trusted.

Don't read it as a modern romance about Jesus. Read it as a witness testimony. It is straightforward. It is full of real people with real faults, recognizably like ourselves, who nevertheless have a report to make: we are not following a myth, we were eyewitness to his majesty, we are testifying of His power and of His future coming. Thematic to early Advent liturgies is the Gospel truth: "Of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come . . . and what I say to you I say to all: Watch, Wait! Keep awake!" (Mark 11:32-33, 37; Matt. 24:42 and Luke 21:36). A related Advent image is that of the watchman who sits all night looking for the dawn. It all sounds very passive, as though there were absolutely nothing that we can do to hasten things along in connection with the phrase "waiting for and hastening." How can you wait and hasten at the same time?!

It is at this juncture that Fleming Rutledge makes a turn in her sermon that I find stunningly brilliant. She says, "That, my fellow Americans, is the secret of the Christian life, knowing how to keep those two modes in creating tension, *waiting for and hastening* the coming of the day of God . . . [the new heavens' and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.]" She goes on to say, "This is so typical of Advent, the time of contrasts and opposites: darkness and light, good and evil, past and future, now and not yet. Finding the right balance between *waiting and hastening* is the challenge of our existence in the body of Christ until he comes again. We might call it ***action in waiting***." Let's unpack this a bit in closing so that we can have something to take home with us – some Christian home work to ponder.

Since the 6th century the Church has been singing this Advent Hymn [not us Methodists, for the most part, but the Lutherans, Episcopalians and Roman Catholics]:

1 Hark! a thrilling voice is sounding;
"Christ is nigh," it seems to say;
"Cast away the works of darkness
O ye children of the day!"

2 Wakened by the solemn warning,
Let the earth-bound soul arise;
Christ, her Sun, all sloth dispelling,
Shines upon the morning skies.

3 Lo! the Lamb, so long expected,
Comes with pardon down from heaven;
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
One and all to be forgiven;

4 So when next He comes in glory,
Wrapping all the world in fear,
May He with His mercy shield us,
And with words of love draw near.

Translated from the Latin by Edward Caswall, 1814-1878

We notice in this grand old hymn the tension between the already and the not. This is the tension to which Advent calls us and in which we Christians live. If only God can bring peace and good will, if only God can create "a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells," then what is the point our doing anything. If there is nothing we can do to improve the situation, then we really might as well withdraw into a private world of gated communities, exclusive

clubs, and personal privilege and enjoy it as best we can before we are overtaken by cancer or senility.

This is where the Advent “action in waiting” comes in, the “hastening.” It is all a matter of what we are pointing toward. Let’s look for a moment at another section of II Peter. Speaking of the promises of God, the apostolic writer says, “We have the prophetic word made more sure Pay attention to this as to a lamp in a dark place, until the day dawn and the morning star rises in your hearts” (II Pet. 1:19). That is the heart of the message of Advent:

*Hark, a thrilling voice is sounding;
Christ is nigh, it seems to say;
Cast away the works of darkness,
O ye children of the day!*

The Church of The Resurrected Lord, the one who is calling us into God’s future, responds to the “thrilling voice” by doing the works of day, the works of light: the ministry to the imprisoned, the soup and sandwiches for the hungry, housing for the orphaned and destitute, a place of health and safety for the low-income, the birthday parties for the children who will have no parties. These are lamps shining in dark places. These are works that glorify Christ while we wait for Him. This is action while waiting to hasten the d”Day of the Lord.” These are small glimpses into God’s future breaking in upon us.

To be sure, lots of Christians do these things, but we have sadly let them devolve in what we call social action. How sad that we have taken divine embodiments of health, hope, and healing and turned them in mere social action. Government social agencies do all these things in an arms-length transaction. The question for the Church this and every Advent and all year round is this: How different are we than a government social agency? To what extent do we come

alongside the poor lost souls left behind in our headlong rush to personal power in the form of wealth and privilege?

In closing, here is one final illustration – a true Advent story from the past. It is a Hanukkah story, about darkness and light. No Supreme Court decisions issued from it, no mighty movements came of it, no commemorative events have happened around it. In comparison to the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre that took place recently.² My story is rather small in scale, but it was not insignificant.

I need you to use your imagination here. Picture a tidy residential street in a tranquil American suburb, ending in a cul-de-sac, lined with ten or fifteen attractive houses. Most of them are gentile homes, but one is Jewish. It is December, and that house has a menorah in the window for the celebration of Hanukkah. One night, vandals smash the windows, remove the menorah, throw it on the ground, and scribble a swastika on the side of the house. The next night, every house on the street had a menorah burning in the window – *lamps shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in the hearts of all.*

Dear friends and members of Church of the Servant, Oklahoma City, we all stand on the threshold of God’s kingdom. We never know from moment to moment when an Advent moment of decision will come our way. The church in its sinful past has participated in so much damage over the years: so much harm to blacks, so much prejudice against Jews, so much degradation of foreign immigrants of all varieties, implicit and explicit harm to all sorts of people labelled as “other” – unbelievers of all varieties, their mortal sin being that they are not like those of us in positions of power and privilege.

² The Pittsburgh synagogue shooting was a mass shooting that occurred at Tree of Life – Or L'Simcha Congregation in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on October 27, 2018, while Shabbat morning services were being held. Eleven people were killed, and seven were injured.

“But it is not too late to start, to initiate change. The Lord is still out there in front of us. His future still approaches, his future in which all will be made new. His promise is sure; he will come. We make ready for him, this Advent Season and every season, by lighting whatever little lights the Lord has put in front of us; no light is too small to be used by him, action in waiting, pointing ahead, looking to Christ and for Christ. Even the smallest lights will be signs in this world, lights to show the way, beachheads to hold against the Enemy [Beelzebub, the prince of the air],” until the Day of the Lord: the day that *shall dawn upon us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace* (Luke 1:78-79).

This is Advent. Let us venture out in the name of the One who has come and will come again, so that in the anticipation of his first coming on Christmas morning, we will be lights of hope in a dark world that yearns for the New Creation of God’s design.

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