

It's the First Sunday of Advent – and this is a hard one – we're usually in the church building, singing those great Advent hymns, like *O come, O come, Emmanuel*; and *Lo! he comes, with clouds descending*; and *Come, thou long expected Jesus*.

Advent is a season of **waiting** – and waiting has taken on a whole new meaning for all of us in 2020. Waiting until it's safe to be physically close to loved ones again; waiting for a vaccine against COVID-19; waiting for some kind of relief for small businesses and people whose resources are being so very tightly stretched.

Advent is a season of waiting, and watching for the Lord – and in our Old Testament passage today, we hear Isaiah's plea to God: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." Well, that would surely wake people up!

The waiting is hard. I've heard it said recently that people have "COVID-fatigue" – we are *tired* of waiting for a vaccine, we are *tired* of wearing our masks and social distancing. I wonder whether we also have "advent-fatigue"? Every year we observe Advent and we pray, Come, Lord Jesus. Are we tired of waiting for Jesus to come and do something? Do we need an earthquake to wake us all up?

The psalmist pleads to God, "Stir up your strength and come to help us... restore us; ...give us life, that we may call upon your Name." Right now, we can relate to that plea. We need restoration – we need new life.

St Paul writes to the church in Corinth (and this applies to all followers of Christ), that the grace of God has been given to us in Christ Jesus – that we do not lack in any spiritual gift as we wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ – and that he will strengthen us to the end, so that we will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. That kind of affirmation bolsters our resilience as we wait for the Lord.

Advent is a season of keeping awake! The coffee-lovers and insomniacs among us love this season! While the Master is away, Jesus commands his disciples to be *alert* – to be *on watch*. What does this mean for us today? What are we observing – what has been happening while the master has been away? When we look outward into the world, we can see: the hungry need feeding; the homeless need housing; the unemployed need support; the sick need care; the lonely need visiting. How should the Church spend its time while we wait for Christ to come? How is Jesus coming into the world through me, through you, through us? That's a question for each of us to ponder individually and in community.

In Advent we wait not only for Christ to come as baby Jesus on Christmas, we also wait for Christ to come *again* – what we call the Second Coming. Our Gospel passage *alludes* to the second coming, but it isn't only about that, because here Jesus is foretelling the imminent destruction of the Temple – this is the main subject of Mark's apocalyptic 13<sup>th</sup> chapter.

Mark's Gospel was likely written sometime in the late 60s C.E. The siege of Jerusalem took place in 70 CE when the Romans destroyed the city including the Temple. It was the end of the Jewish national way of life up to that point. Jesus is warning his followers of the signs that will accompany the end of the Temple, and he is quite clear that this will take place within a generation – and so it did.

But there is more... Jesus is also warning of the judgement that is to come on what Paul calls “the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Last week’s readings touched on this topic as well – there will be a day of reckoning, when heaven and earth collide. We don’t know what that will look like. We don’t know when it will come. Scripture says we will have no warning – it will come quietly, like a thief in the night. “...About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”

Meanwhile, we wait, we watch, and we stay awake, during this very challenging time. I will conclude with some wisdom from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*: “I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

Amen.