

At Home Worship
November 29, 2020
First Sunday of Advent
First Presbyterian Church-Sweetwater

Find a Sacred Space

Sit comfortably, perhaps with something warm to drink, where you can look out on the beauty Of God's creation today. Read aloud or quietly to yourself, or as a family share the various parts of the service.

Greeting - The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Call to Worship and Prayer of Praise

Let us meet together in the house of the Lord until Christ returns!

How must we get ready for that day when the Lord will come again?

The Lord is with us always, in every part and facet of our lives.

But will the Day of the Lord be soon or will the Lord tarry?

This is the Day of the Lord! Let us sing praise and be glad in it.

Blessed be the name of the Lord!

O merciful and loving God, we await that day when Christ will return to call the Church home into eternity. Help us to be faithful and true servants and stewards until that day comes. In Christ we pray. Amen.

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**The Lighting of the Advent Candles    Hope: Walking in Darkness**

**Leader #1:** Today at the beginning of the Advent season, we light the first candle . . the candle of Hope. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

**Leader #2:** We call this candle "HOPE" to remember the promises God gave through the prophets long ago, and how those promises were fulfilled when God sent Jesus into our world to bring light and life to all who follow him.

Long before Jesus was born, when the Jewish people were experiencing very dark and difficult times, the Prophet Isaiah wrote: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined . . . For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

**Light one purple candle.**

**Leader #1** Let us pray: We thank you, Almighty God, that whenever there is great darkness in our world you send Jesus through us to bring hope to all who will receive him in their hearts. Help us in these next weeks to prepare our homes and our lives to welcome him in spirit and in truth. Amen.

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Sing, Listen, or Read Hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" # 88

1. O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

2. O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by Thine advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows put to flight.

Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

3. O come, desire of nations, bind all peoples in one the heart and mind; bid envy, strife, and discord cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace.

Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

A Time of Confession and Assurance

Gracious and forgiving God, in this Advent Season we are called upon to set aside time to worship you and make new commitments. We need to take time to turn from our sin, reflect on your gifts to us, and consider how we might best dedicate ourselves to you once again. Forgive us for being consumed with other agendas that push you to the margins of our lives. As we announce your coming with the ringing of bells, help us also to prepare for your coming by waiting upon you and listening for you with eagerness and joy. Make this season truly holy for us and in us.

(silent prayer of personal confession).....Amen.

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. May the God of mercy, who forgives us all our sins, strengthen us in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life. Amen.

Sing, Listen, or Read Hymn “The King Is Coming”

O the King is coming, the King is coming! I just heard the trumpets sounding, And now His face I see; O the King is coming, the King is coming Praise God, He's coming for me!

Advent 1

Oh, You'd Better Watch Out!

Mark 13:32-37

It always feels strange beginning Advent in November. But the stores are already decorated for Christmas, so why not? I hope the department stores won't think we're trying to spoil their party by injecting a little religion into this busy season of the year.

It reminds me of an item that appeared in *USA Today* last year about this time. Authorities in Bal Harbor, FL outfitted the baby Jesus in their outdoor Nativity Scene with a GPS locator as a protection against thieves. The previous Baby Jesus was stolen even though it had been bolted down. “I don't anticipate this will ever happen again,” said Dina Cellini, who oversees the display, “but we may need to rely on technology to save our Savior. The Mary and Joseph statues will also be outfitted with GPS.”

Interesting! Somebody stole the baby Jesus. I'm not surprised. They've already stolen Christmas. I'm exaggerating, of course. Still, I'm thankful you are here today as we seek to reflect on the meaning of Christ's coming into the world.

I thought, just to add interest to our services this Advent, we would use some popular Christmas songs to introduce our sermon ideas. After all, what would we do during Advent and Christmas without music? Studies show that listening to Christmas carols boosts our spirits. It also regulates our heart rate and breathing which, in turn, reduces stress. In other words, listening to Christmas music is good for us.

For these Advent sermons, we're going to use popular as well as standard religious music as a means of focusing our thoughts on the great themes that this special season suggests.

I decided that the familiar first line of the popular song "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" would better fit this first Sunday in Advent. This Christmas tune sounds very much like an effort by parents to get children to behave themselves during the next few weeks: "Oh, you better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town." And especially those lines, "He's making his list, checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice."

Some people think of God that way. And they read the same kind of warning into our lesson for today from Mark's Gospel. Speaking of his return, Jesus told his disciples,

"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.

It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

Each year we begin the season of Advent focusing on Jesus' words about his Second Coming rather than his first. Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for his death and resurrection. But he wanted them to know he would be returning for them. Jesus says in our lesson from the Gospel regarding his return that we are to live in a spirit of watchfulness like children eagerly waiting for Christmas Day. We are awaiting the return of our Lord.

We need to put Christ's words into perspective, however. Many well-meaning followers of Christ have abused Christ's teachings about the day of his return.

First of all, Jesus was insistent nobody knows when this climatic event will occur. The angels in heaven don't know. Even Christ himself did not know.

There is an amusing Hasidic story about a rabbi who crossed a village square every morning on his way to the temple to pray. One morning, a large Russian Cossack soldier, who happened to be in a vile mood, accosted him, saying, "Hey, rabbi, where are you going?"

The rabbi simply said, “I don’t know.”

This infuriated the soldier. “What do you mean, you don’t know? Every morning for twenty-five years you have crossed the village square and gone to the temple to pray. Don’t fool with me. Why are you telling me you don’t know?” He grabbed the old rabbi by the coat and dragged him off to jail.

Just as the Cossack was about to push him into the cell, the rabbi turned to him, and softly said, “You see, I didn’t know.”

Someone asks, when will Christ return when will history come to a climax and a new world order, an order straight from God, be introduced? The answer is, we don’t know. The early church thought it would be in their lifetime. It’s been 2,000 years. “Why does the Lord tarry?” many ask. We don’t know.

We should not be surprised at that. There is much in life that God has not revealed to us. We don’t even know what tomorrow might bring.

I was reading recently about the tragedy of September 11. The people who died that day had no idea such a fate would befall them. I’m certain they would have called in sick or something if they knew the jetliners were going to ram those towers.

Have you ever thought about those who could have been there that day, but were not? Sometime back the head of security of the Twin Towers related some amazing stories about those who might have been there.

One man was late because it was his turn to bring the doughnuts. One woman’s alarm clock didn’t go off. One missed the bus. One spilled food on her clothes at the last minute and had to take time to change. Another’s car wouldn’t start. And one person couldn’t get a taxi. Perhaps the most amazing was the man who put on a new pair of shoes that morning and headed in to work, only to develop a blister on his foot on the way. Because he stopped at a drugstore to buy a Band-Aid for his foot, he is alive today.

We don’t know what the next moment may bring. Imagine the person who couldn’t get a taxi cursing his luck that he was going to be late, only to discover his seemingly bad luck had saved his life. Be careful about how you evaluate your life. We live in an uncertain world. Don’t waste time listening to someone who has got it figured out just when Christ will return. We don’t even know for certain what this evening will bring. Let it go. Trust God and let it go. Jesus was insistent nobody knows when his return will be.

And we really can’t say much about what will happen when that day does come. I know there are some people who are enamored with the *Left Behind* series of books and movies. And don’t forget Hal Lindsay’s classic, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. And my favorite, *Eighty-eight Reasons Why the Rapture Will Definitely Occur in 1988*. I’m sure these books were written by well-meaning individuals, but their attempts at biblical scholarship are quite lacking. The scriptures provide us with very few details about the nature of Christ’s return, and much of what we do have is written in a kind of code that can be widely interpreted, or misinterpreted as the case might be.

In other words, don't let the fear mongers cause you undue distress. We have very little information about the end of time. Certainly if the return of Christ means the end of life as we know it, then it will be dramatic. But other than that, we don't know when it will happen and we don't know the details of what's coming. Therefore, rather than sitting around worrying about it, let's focus on how Christ wants us to live here and now. That's the purpose of today's lesson from Mark. It is to remind us of two essential truths: One, the future is in God's hands, not ours. And two, we can trust God for the future.

Let's begin with truth one: the future is in God's hands, not ours. Just as we don't know when Christ's return will be, so also we don't know what the future may hold. Some people are excited about the future. They see cures for cancer and all manner of diseases. They see human beings routinely living in good health for 100 years, 150 years or more.

The World Future Society released their forecasts for the next 25 years a few months ago and some of those forecasts were upbeat. For example these futurists predict that by the year 2025 the world will have a billion millionaires. That's a lot of wealthy people. I hope you're one of them. They also forecast a new process to remove salt from seawater and make it drinkable at a much lower cost than thought possible. They predict drastic improvements in artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, nanotechnology and robotics. These advances will improve every aspect of our lives.

But they also report that the threat of another cold war with China, Russia, or both could replace terrorism as the chief foreign-policy concern of the United States. Scenarios for what a war with China or Russia would look like make the clashes and wars in which the United States is now involved seem insignificant.

How much of this will occur? No one knows. But here's what we do know. The same God who sent a tiny babe 2,000 years ago to redeem our world is the same God who holds the future. "He's got the whole world in His hands." God loves His creation with a love that cannot be comprehended. Here's what you and I need to do. Make good decisions about the future to the best of our ability and then trust God. The future is in God's hands, not ours.

The century in which Jesus spoke these words were just as turbulent as ours. In 70 AD, about the time Mark was writing his Gospel, the Roman army did the unthinkable it destroyed the great Temple in Jerusalem to punish Israel for an earlier insurrection. At the same time, the tiny Christian community was being severely persecuted. The times were dark, so dark that most Christians believed that Christ would surely return in their lifetime. There is much evidence of this belief in the New Testament. But it was not to be. Instead Christ instructs his disciples not to be afraid.

The future is in God's hands, and we can trust God for whatever may come.

This is not to say that we should ignore Christ's words about his return. He wants us to live expectantly, but it would be a travesty if the words of the one who constantly reassured his disciples to "Fear not, I have overcome the world," should be distorted by slipshod biblical interpretation to cause fear in the ones who love him today. Christ will return someday, but it will be an occasion of rejoicing, not of heartbreak and fear.

John Phillips, in his book *Exploring Revelation*, tells about the return of Richard I, the Lionhearted, to England. It was during the time of the crusades. While Richard was away doing battle in the

Mideast, his kingdom fell on bad times. His brother, Prince John, justly vilified in the tales of Robin Hood, usurped the kingdom and misruled the realm. The people of England suffered under John's rule and longed for the return of their rightful king. They prayed that it might be soon. Then one day Richard returned. He landed in England and marched straight for his throne. John's castles tumbled before Richard like ninepins. Richard the Lionhearted laid claim to his throne, and none dared stand in his path. The people shouted their delight. They rang peal after peal on the bells. The Lion was back! Long live the king!

John Phillips adds these hopeful words: "One day a King greater than Richard will lay claim to a realm greater than England. Those who have abused the earth in His absence, seized His domains, and mismanaged His world will all be swept aside."

That day's coming, friends, and it will be a grand and glorious day. Get ready. No one knows when it will be. But get ready. No one knows what shape it will take, but we know this: God's in charge and God can be trusted. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

Sing, Listen, or Read Hymn "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" # 82

1. 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.

2. 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.

Blessing

The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you. 2 Timothy 4:22