

## **First Sunday in Advent: November 29, 2020**

You can view this service on YouTube at  
<https://youtu.be/W3vqzv83Hlc>

### **The Sermon: Rev. Carol Ruthven**

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

Advent: Waiting and Watching

“But 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.”  
Mark 13:32-33

Perhaps you are like me and there are times when you find it difficult to be patient when you are waiting for something. Waiting is often hard because we feel that we have no control over the outcome. This year has certainly been one of waiting and at times painfully difficult waiting. We have waited during lockdowns and quarantines. We have waited for test results for the coronavirus, wondering if they will be positive or negative. We continue to wait to safely visit loved ones in nursing homes and family members, who do not live with us. We are still waiting for the availability of a safe vaccine for the coronavirus.

Many people are waiting for their children to be able to return safely to school or waiting to find new employment. And we have all longed for the time when we can return to worship, sing together and receive Holy Communion.<sup>1</sup> During this long and difficult time of waiting, there has been tension between anxiety and uncertainty on the one hand and hopeful anticipation on the other. Advent is like this.

The word Advent comes from the Latin word for “coming” or “arrival.” It marks the beginning of a new year in our church calendar. It is a time of spiritual waiting and

preparing for two arrivals. We are waiting for the Feast of the Incarnation on December 25. We will celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, that glorious moment of incarnation when God comes to be with us in human form. And we are waiting for the second coming of Christ.

Those who lived before the birth of Jesus did not know the day or hour of the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah, so they were encouraged to live in a state of watchfulness. Like our ancient Jewish ancestors and Jesus' disciples, we do not know the day or hour of the second coming of Jesus Christ. As we keep awake and remain watchful, we live in a time of hopeful expectation trusting that God is working for us and through us in the world. <sup>ii</sup>

The waiting and watchfulness during Advent is different than waiting in long lines to shop on Black Friday. That is a passive and empty form of waiting because we know when the stores will open and we know what we want. The watchful waiting for Christ to come again is an active form of waiting that is pregnant with hope and full of expectation.

We can understand the difference between passive and active waiting by comparing it to the activities of fishermen. Waiting for spring to arrive is a time of passive waiting for fishermen. For them, time simply passes by. Once spring arrives and fishing begins, fishermen do not mind at all waiting for trout to take their bait, because it is an active waiting, full of expectation. They are always prepared and watching, because they never know when the trout might appear. This kind of preparation and active waiting is similar to what Jesus had in mind when he urged his followers to "Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13:33).

We are not expected to know or predict when Jesus will return, although there are plenty of people who boldly proclaim to know the exact time and date of the second coming of Christ. Jesus even said that nobody, not even the angels in heaven, know the time of his eventual return. Only God knows. However, we are expected to live as if Jesus' return is just around the corner. Perhaps you have seen the bumper stickers or T-shirts that say "Jesus is coming. Look busy!" Jesus does not expect us to know the time of his return, but he does care about how we spend our time until his coming again. We should not idle our time away. We are expected to remain alert to the fact that there are signs of Jesus' rule all around us, because Jesus has already arrived.

To explain the significance of this time of waiting, Jesus tells a parable about the master of a household, who departs on a journey and leaves his servants in charge of the house. He tells the doorkeeper to watch for the master's return. Jesus warns everyone not to fall asleep because the master could arrive "in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn." (Mark 13:35) These four times were used by the Romans to divide the hours during the night. For those hearing Mark's Gospel during the reign of the Roman Empire, they would have understood that Jesus was subtly making the point that Christ is Lord at all times, even under the reign of the Roman Emperor. <sup>iii</sup>

At the Episcopal Church of St. Andrew's in Lexington, the front altar has a large stained-glass window with an image of Jesus arriving at a door during the night and holding a lamp. This was the original stained-glass window from the church when it was first built in 1880 as the historically black congregation in our diocese. The image in the

stained-glass window is a powerful image that reminds us that Jesus may come again at any time, and we must be prepared.

Advent therefore is an important time for reflecting on what we should do while we await Jesus' return. By keeping alert and awake and living our lives in accordance with Jesus, who has already come, died, and been raised, we will be prepared to live in the promised realm of God when it does come. We live as Jesus would have us live, if we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for widows and orphans, and visit prisoners.

We have been faithful through our parish's ministry of providing nutritious food from our Garden for the Hungry to feed people in Madison County; providing lunches once a week for homeless persons in the spring, summer and fall; providing shelter at Room in the Inn for homeless persons during the winter; visiting elderly persons in nursing homes when it was safe to do so; and building relationships with other churches, faith communities, and our neighbors. Through all of these activities, we witness the magnificent presence of the Holy Spirit at work in the midst of our parish's ministry. The opportunities for ministry in the future are limited only by our human imagination. The future is pregnant with possibilities as we work together in ministry to realize more fully the realm of God.

We can take time to reflect on what we have learned during the past nine months. What have we learned about what is most important in our church life? What new and innovative ways of continuing our ministry have allowed us to reach people, who would not otherwise know about us? How have we learned to help and support one another during these difficult times of waiting? How have we nurtured and sustained relationships while we have been physically separated from one another? How can we

respond to the suffering we see around us? How has your relationship with God grown during the last nine months? What might God be calling you to do as we begin this new year in the church calendar? What might God be calling us to do as we move forward?

The prophet Isaiah assured us that God is the potter and we are the clay. When we have faith and trust in God, we allow God to mold us into whatever God wants us to be. The words of Isaiah remind us that God has been and remains faithful. God is at work among us. This knowledge enables us to be patient, watchful, and trust with expectation filled with hope as we partner with God in the unfolding of the fullness of God's kingdom on earth.

Almighty God, give us grace and strength as we continue to work to serve you and those most in need and give us patience in this mortal life as we await the glorious coming again of your Son Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal life after death.

Amen. <sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice, "Waiting Upon the Lord," First Sunday of Advent, [https://episcopalchurch.org/files/stw\\_christmas\\_advent\\_2020\\_final.pdf](https://episcopalchurch.org/files/stw_christmas_advent_2020_final.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice, "Waiting Upon the Lord,"

<sup>iii</sup> Ched Myers. Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus. (Orbis Books, 1988), 347.

<sup>iv</sup> Collects: Contemporary, The Book of Common Prayer, p. 21.