

Year B Advent 1 Living Our 'Why' Will Keep Us Awake Mark 13 vv24 to 37

“Tis the season for holiday shopping.” “Tis the season to shop local.” “Tis the season to shop holiday sales.” It is really hard to get a grip on Advent when retailers are doing their darndest to lead us into the grip of Christmas – a Christmas that is focused on the spending of dollars: “Give the gift of giving with this holiday sale!”

This is *not* the season of shopping. It is not even the season of *Christmas*. Today is the first day of the season of Advent. Understanding the season of Advent and dwelling in the season of Advent can go a long way to preserving our health and sanity through the crazy crush of Christmas already going on in the world around us. Even more importantly, understanding and dwelling in the season of Advent strengthens our identity as the Church, the body of Christ. Advent tells us what we are longing for. It shapes our hopes and desires and propels us toward the time when our hopes and desires will be complete. It is this hope – this intense and life-giving hope that fuels our passion to be engaged and active followers of Jesus the Christ. It is this passionate spirituality, this certainty in *who* we are and *why* we are as Christians, that catches the attention of the world, drawing others into God’s love in Christ to share with us in God’s purpose of total reconciliation of people and planet with God and each other.

So...who are we as Christians? What is our “why” as Christians? And how does Advent connect with this identity and purpose?

The Ven. Dr. Jay Koyle writes, in *Becoming the Story We Tell*, “Advent is the season in which the church casts its gaze to the horizon to catch sight of God’s future. Even during times of darkness, difficulty, or despair, Advent teaches us to

“remember forward.” It reassures us that we can allow our lives today to take the shape of God’s tomorrow, living in the full confidence that God’s promises will be fulfilled. Along with the season of Christmas and the time between Epiphany and Lent, Advent emphasizes that Jesus Christ is the herald of God’s Kingdom. To speak of our Lord in this way, however, is to recognize him as more than a preacher of the Kingdom. After all, the prophets and John the Baptist were also preachers of the Kingdom. To speak of our Lord as the herald of God’s Kingdom is to claim that in Jesus the Kingdom is present. As the great missionary bishop Lesslie Newbigin once said, ‘In Christ we are no longer dealing only with the proclamation of the Kingdom; we are also dealing with the presence of the Kingdom.’ Jesus Christ proclaims and embodies God’s kingdom.” (Advent Scripture Study written by Jay for Algoma).

Advent is very often referred to as the season of waiting. If we, as the Church, are casting our gaze ahead to catch sight of God’s future, we may think that we are waiting for the arrival of a baby – of the little baby Jesus on Christmas morning. We are not. That event has already taken place. That little baby was born a long time ago. We acknowledge and celebrate Jesus’ birth because that was the moment when God chose to dwell among us, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us to reconcile us to God – Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, Ruler of all things.

We are not waiting for a baby. We are waiting for that baby – all grown up – to come again in glory: “the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.” As we will soon hear Isaiah declare, “For as the earth brings forth its

shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations” (Is.61:11). God promised. God keeps his promises. John of Patmos was shown a vision of this time of completion: “I saw a new heaven and a new earth,” he writes. “[F]or the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’” (see Rev.21:1-5).

This time of newness won’t be easy: “[T]he sun will be darkened,” we hear today. “[A]nd the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken”. Jesus speaks these words right after he has also warned his disciples, “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains” (Mark 13:7-8). People hear or read such things in scripture and think that was a prediction of the future. We look around for signs and clues that it might be happening now. Newsflash: not only *is* it happening now, it was happening then. War, earthquakes, famines...when have we *not* had those things? The Israelites were in Egypt because of a famine. The Jewish people were captured and hauled off to Babylon during war. Mark was writing his Gospel to a small, shell-shocked Christian community who had just lived through war and the destruction of their

beautiful temple. “Truly I tell you,” says Jesus, “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” They were living through the “birth pangs” then and we are living through the birth pangs now. “The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time,” Paul tells us (Rom.8:22). Experiencing and enduring “birth pangs” is the way in which we understand the often painful passing away of the old broken age into the birth of the new, glorious age of the fulness of God’s kingdom. This time of birth pangs has been going on for a long time. We have been awaiting the birth of the new age of completion for a long time.

Waiting for such long a long time can make you forget what you are waiting for and even that you are waiting at all. With all of the conflict and war happening in the world around us, I said to someone, someone who assured me that he is a Christian, I said, “I pray for the time when every sword will be beaten into plowshares.” And he replied, “That’ll never happen.” This person has forgotten what we are waiting for. This person has forgotten that we *are* waiting. This person has forgotten God’s promise, has forgotten our sure and certain hope in the fulfillment of this promise: Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The promise of this fulfillment, the vision of this fulfillment is woven throughout all of scripture. We are not on earth waiting tolerantly for the time when we die and go to heaven. That is not the endgame. The Garden of Eden was not something we had and lost through sin. The Garden of Eden is the perfection promised to us. We wait on earth for the fulfillment of God’s promise...and we do not wait tolerantly.

“No wonder nothing is happening,” John Dominic Crossan tells us Jesus would say to us if he were here, standing before us in the flesh today. “No wonder nothing is happening. You are sitting around waiting for God to fix everything.” Nothing will be “fixed” without God but neither will it be “fixed” without us. We are named as Christians because we have chosen to follow Christ. That doesn’t just mean we say “We believe”. Being a Christian means actually following in the footsteps of Christ: healing the sick, eating and drinking with outcasts and sinners, embracing the marginalized, fighting the fight against all brokenness, against all that is corrupt and oppressive and unequal...not saying *God* will fix it but figuring out how *we* do that in *our* context with *our* gifts. We are not lacking any spiritual gift, Paul assures us, as we wait. We are Christians – we are the body of Christ, made a new creation and clothed with Christ in baptism. Since Jesus Christ didn’t just proclaim the kingdom but, also lived the kingdom and revealed the kingdom because he carried the kingdom within him...well, now, *that* is us. “It is no longer I who lives,” says Paul, “but Christ who lives in me” (Gal.2:20). “It is in Jesus that God's kingdom is present in the life of the world,” writes Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, “and this presence is continued - under the sign of the cross - in the community that confesses Jesus as Lord and belongs to him as his body.” The life of the crucified and risen Christ lives on in us. His mission lives on in us (Lesslie Newbigin. *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Kindle Locations 720-725,1656-1657). Kindle Edition.) And his mission was nothing less than bringing to completion the fulness of God’s kingdom here among us.

This is who we are when we are faithfully the Church – we are the life and mission of Christ. Desiring the fulfillment of this mission, waiting and longing for the

fulness of the kingdom, and knowing it will come, is our “why” – it is the why for every thought, word, and deed. We don’t simply think, “Gee, it’d be nice if God’s kingdom would come on earth as in heaven.” We long for it passionately with every ounce of our being: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence,” Isaiah beseeches (Is.64:1). “Stir up your might, and come to save us!” the psalmist cries. Feel their passionate longing for God’s triumphant return, immerse yourself in the intensity of the desire. This is our why – this is what we await. See the Kingdom. Be the Kingdom. Reveal the Kingdom. Christ’s body – his life and mission – traveling the trajectory toward the fulness that *is* coming: that is who we are and “why” we are. Advent is our reminder, the time of intentional immersion in our “who” and “why” – our identity and our purpose. We are not only reminded to “remember forward” but also to “live forward.” We live forward amid the fragments and ruins to watch for the new thing God is doing: Revealing the goodness of God’s Kingdom and creating more goodness, hastening the day when the waiting will end.

“Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” Live your “why”.