

Living “Between the Times”

First Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24:36-44 Isaiah 2:1-5 Romans 13:11-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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A few moments ago I shared with the children that the church calendar doesn't begin on January 1, like our regular calendar, but on the First Sunday of Advent, which is always the 4th Sunday before Christmas Day. However, the Christian liturgical year, much like the regular calendar year, is made up of different seasons. From a traditional Christianity standpoint, it tells a narrative of the saving work of God in and through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by working chronologically through Jesus' life-story and beyond to the work of the early church.

So today we begin a new church year with the start of the season of Advent. As a reminder from the words we heard during the lighting of the first candle of the Advent Wreath, the word “advent” literally means – “coming.” This season was initiated in the early church as a way to prepare the faithful for the celebration of the coming of the Lord on Christmas Day.

Throughout history, however, the church has assigned a twofold message to the season of Advent. As mentioned, it is a season that prepares us for remembering and celebrating Christ's **first coming** as the baby Jesus born in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago. The season also seeks to focus our attention on the need to direct our hearts and minds to await Christ's **second coming** at the end of time.

Though not overemphasized in the Presbyterian denomination, this is actually a theme that runs throughout the Bible. Theologians call it **eschatology - the study of the end times**, as described in ancient Hebrew and Christian literature. I personally agree with a majority of modern biblical scholars, however, that believe that **this language about Christ's second coming is meant to be interpreted figuratively and metaphorically, rather than a literal coming of Jesus in the flesh**, appearing somehow in the clouds accompanied by trumpet blasts and followed by Christians floating up in the air to meet him.

In other words, contrary to the belief of many, I am among those who think that the still-popular *Left Behind* book series is simply fiction, and bad fiction at that, loosely based on a *literal* understanding of the Second Coming of Christ, also known as the Rapture.

But whether taken literally or not, the scripture passages assigned by the lectionary for **the four Sundays of Advent are meant to remind the believing individual and community of faith that we are living “between the times”**: the time between Jesus' first coming and Christ's final return. Or, as many theologians prefer to state it, **Advent celebrates the tension between the now and the not yet**. The Christ-event extends across these two “comings.” Again, this is the traditional understanding of the meaning of Advent.

The readings that we just heard for this First Sunday of Advent focus exclusively not on Jesus' birth, but upon the theme of the *final* appearance of the Messiah and the signs that will precede that event. Biblically, this is often referred to as the Day of the Lord, or the coming of the Son of Man.

Isaiah 2:1-5, today's Old Testament reading, speaks of the ideal time in the future when all hostilities will cease and all the nations will stream to the Temple of the Lord. Well, if world peace and non-violence describe what it will be like at the 'end of time,' then we certainly don't seem anywhere close to that, do we? In fact, **though world peace and non-violence should be a constant endeavor, do you really think that there will ever be a time on earth when that becomes a reality?**

The great world powers, including and led by the United States, continue to manufacture (using Isaiah's language) swords and spears – or their modern, more deadly equivalents. Unfortunately, fighting a war arouses more interest, budgetary considerations, and scientific research than the development of plowshares and pruning hooks - the implements that till the soil and feed the hungry with the fruit of the earth.

This passage from Isaiah calls us to recognize that the present time, our 'now,' is a time dominated by retaliation, violence, division, prejudice, hatred, starvation, war, and dramatic distinctions between the haves and the have-nots. This way of living in the "now" is *challenged* as we prepare for the coming of the Lord.

The New Testament Epistle reading, **Romans 13:11-14**, was written to a Christian community already living between the times, warning church members that they must pay attention to the quality of the lives they lead. They are reminded that the second coming of the Lord is nearer now, with the passing of time, than it was at the time of their conversion to Christianity. **It appears that the first Christians believed that the second coming of Christ was imminent, that it would come in their lifetime**, and that it was, in fact, delayed for some reason.

On a much less cosmic scale, however, than the first and second coming of the Lord, **are not each of us also living "between the times," between our own birth and death? What we do with that time, therefore, matters and makes a difference.**

This Advent theme of active preparation for the future is echoed in the Gospel passage from **Matthew 24:36-44**: the need for Christians to live good lives, to be awake, ready, and prepared for the unexpected coming of Christ. In other words, there is an urgency to be watchful, because something big is coming. When it will come cannot be determined – but it will come, so be ready. But in all reality, **in our day and age we need to honestly ask: readiness for what?** From a theologically progressive Christian perspective it no longer makes sense to prepare and watch for the Jesus' in-person return in the clouds, followed by the rapture, the taking of believers who will miraculously soar up from the earth to meet him there.

Bringing an interpretation of scripture into the 21st century may indeed lead to a different understanding of this notion of the second coming. **Perhaps the understanding that Jesus will come again refers not to the end of time, which is a worldview many progressives, including myself, no long hold to anyway, but rather to a continuously or repeatedly coming again** – a second, third, fourth...one millionth coming again.

Perhaps, then, what we should be preparing and watching for is the presence of Christ that comes in our midst each and every day – a presence that can be seen in the face of people we encounter on a daily basis – the light and image of God within each and every person.

Perhaps our season of Advent this year can be a time when you and I are more intentional about staying alert and open to recognizing God's presence in and among our lives – the ordinary, routine, daily lives that each of us live. For Jesus teaches that there is a quality of life asked of us that transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

And let us also be intentional to bring the light of God's grace, love and peace into this world's darkness as we continue to live "between the times."

Amen.