

Sermon for Advent 1, Year A
December 1, 2013
The Rev. Betsy Tesi, Interim Rector

When we returned from our trip to Connecticut to visit family for Thanksgiving, I walked into the room we are setting up as a study, and discovered devastation. The cats had squirmed into a box and discovered an item called “The Advent Calendar For Your Cat.” It was filled with cat treats, but I had never given it to them, keeping it instead as an item in my Tacky Jesus Collection, next to the Sacred Heart of Jesus pepper grinder and the Glow-in-the-Dark Nightlight Lamb of God Jesus. But this year, the tape of the box was opened during the unpacking of books, and left on the floor while we drove North. While we ate with my aunts and uncles, our kitties went to town. They ripped out the backs of the treats and sampled or chewed all the days from the center of the calendar before abandoning their naughty deeds. Clearly, I have to find a different Advent calendar this year.

Have you ever noticed all the Advent calendars out there? Lego does different Advent calendars each year. They come in a large box, and you open the door and build a new toy each day of the month, in keeping with the theme of the calendar. My favorite was the Castle Advent calendar. I kid you not—one of the days, you built your own executioner’s block. Because nothing says “birth of Jesus” quite so well as “off with his head!”. Don’t worry, if that’s not quite your speed, you can also get the Star Wars Lego Advent calendar.

Our culture is really jumping on this Advent bandwagon, as another way to “count down to Christmas”. Only 25 shopping days left until we dive into the pile under the tree! Believe me, now that I live *in* Tysons Corner, I’m a little nervous about the “shopping season” this year. There’s nothing wrong with giving gifts to family and friends, but the reason we are here in church is because we are seeking some sort of deeper connection, right? So let’s be counter cultural for a few minutes. We are not counting down to Christmas. We are waiting with hopeful expectation to celebrate the birth of a baby who would change how we know God.

Today, we begin Advent, the first of the new year in the Christian calendar. After the 9AM service, we will be making our own Advent candles! Indeed, in my organizer calendar, the weeks have changed from green to purple, indicating the new season of the church year. You might notice I’m wearing blue, and our altar is draped in blue. Here at Holy Cross, we use the color called “sarum blue”. St. Osmund wrote the rite combining Norman and Anglo-Saxon rites, and like any proper liturgical change, it did not go smoothly. Elizabeth I abolished it several centuries later, until us. I couldn’t figure out exactly what the Sarum rite did, but it seems to have been a rite focused on expectation and exploring the role of Mary, mother of Jesus. In bringing back some of those elements, the Episcopal church also authorized us to use blue hangings and vestments during this season, to further differentiate it from Lent. Instead of focusing on fasting and penitence, instead we focus on waiting and expectation. Traditionally, the theme of this week is the week of hope. Advent as a season calls us to explore how the coming of the Messiah changes how we know God.

It is a good week for hope, as we face prophecy after prophecy. God speaks to God’s people of the good news of peace.

Hold the phone: how can I call this good news? Our readings this morning are downright apocalyptic. Several of them are often quoted by people who believe in The Rapture—the belief that the second coming of Christ will be rapid, immediately snatching up believers and sending the world spiraling into global chaos. (Merry holidays!) The collect seems to put us on guard, casting away darkness and putting on armor. You don’t wear armor to

sit around and watch Sunday afternoon football. You wear armor when you are about to go out and fight a battle! During a time in our nation's culture when so many of us feel as though we are living on the brink, I imagine I am not the only one who must look twice to find the comfort in the Gospel.

Jesus tells us that no one knows when the end will happen. During this entire discourse, he later promises that some of his contemporaries will still be alive when he returns. The skeptics among us will point out that prophecy didn't come true. Jesus didn't return quickly, and the nations remain at war. Jesus urges us to remain on edge, to keep awake, for we have no idea when the last judgment begins.

But let's consider for a moment what the gospel writer was trying to do. Let's consider the emotional state of the reader of the story versus the listener in the story. Remember—there are always at least two audiences for the written word. (Yes, the English majors of the world finally get to do something useful!) There is the audience within the story you read, and there is the audience of you and whoever else is reading the book. Let's apply that to Matthew: he is writing the story of Christ's prophecies of the end times and telling that story to other followers of the new way. He is eager to see Christ's return, but he also seems to express joy that there is a period of waiting. For the people in the story, this is joy-filled. The delay means that God is postponing the last judgment so that more people can hear the Good News of Jesus—that sins are forgiven and that our slates are washed clean. More people can hear that they are God's beloved. More people can share the Good News. More people have the chance to proclaim that the Messiah has come and our sins are blotted out. No one missed out on the chance to be part of God's elect—we have a huge grace period.

In Matthew's time, for those listeners, it meant thanksgiving because a period of active evangelism was about to begin—it meant adventure, for they were called to take the Good News to the streets.

What will this sound like to us today? As listeners today, we tend to be a much more anxious society. We don't have enough time or money or energy to do what we need to do. Spreading the good news? Whose job is that, today? We do, in fact, have missionaries attached to the Episcopal church—Holy Cross has an active presence in international mission. It's not just the job of the missionaries, though, to go out in the world and preach the gospel. We also have an active community of seekers, of people who are discovering what being a Christian might mean to them. We say that this table is open to all comers. The grace period that Jesus gives his followers continues even to today. We have time to explore our doubts and our questions. We have the time to learn to be God's beloved. Slow down. It's Advent. This is time that is given to you as a gift.

This is the beauty of Advent. We start on such a hopeful note—this idea that God has granted us a time out, a half-time, some extra time—to really discover more of who we are as human beings. Christ hasn't yet returned to usher in the end of all things and the final judgments... because God isn't yet finished with us. The mystery is still unfolding. We haven't yet learned all of what God hopes to teach us as humans. God is still speaking to us, still calling.

During Advent, we invite you to slow down and to listen a little more deeply. Light your candle this week for Advent, and let it burn with hope and expectation. God is speaking to you. God calls out with good news: you are God's beloved. Await the story told again, of the Messiah born to you, to bring Good News to the world.