

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF THE CHURCH YEAR:

ADVENT 1, DECEMBER 3, 2023



Scripture Reading: Mark 13:24-37 NRSV

The Coming of the Son of Man

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶“Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Necessity for Watchfulness

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

³⁵ 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, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Sermon: My message today is entitled, “*Waiting in Hope*”

Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

Please pray with me: Loving God, may these days of Advent draw us closer to you. Maybe this time, we will truly sense your presence in the new fallen snow or in the twinkle of tree lights. Maybe this year, the Salvation Army bells will “ding” differently for us. Maybe now, each ornament will look a little bit more cheerful. As we hear the scriptures of the season, we pray, let the words fall upon our ears as if you, O God, were whispering them one by one. You have been here all along... waiting for us to notice. We pray in the name of Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Amen.

As the children waited to put their ornaments on the trees on Wednesday night during the Hanging of the greens, ...I overheard a mother tell her anxious little one, with ornament in hand, “Just wait...Christmas is a time of waiting.” Perfect advice for this first Sunday of Advent!

We have been there... waiting. It’s something that we never quite complete...the waiting, that is. What are you waiting for? We are waiting for grief to be less... waiting to be well again...waiting to find place to call home... waiting for reunions with family members who are estranged from us...waiting to complete a project or for an event to run smoothly...waiting for a gathering or a Christmas concert; waiting for enough snow to go skiing. We are waiting for the birth of the baby; or for a surgery or for recovery; we are waiting to graduate and or for retirement.

.... As a church family, we are waiting for the final pieces of this transition-time-puzzle to fit together. We are waiting to meet the future “co-pastor” and waiting for “Call” Sunday...you are all probably NOW waiting for me to be done with list...

The season of Advent call us to be better wait-ers...to be watchful and ready. Advent invites us to embrace waiting as a *spiritual discipline*. Holly Whitcomb, in her book, “The Seven Spiritual Gifts of Waiting” writes: *The Advent season will not be rushed. Advent carols must be sung. The Advent candles must be lit one by one, week by week. The doors of the Advent calendar must be opened day by day. Christmas will finally arrive after all the expectant scriptures have been read and when the baby has finally been born.*

During times of waiting, God is vibrantly at work within us.

The Christmas carol reminds us, “Oh, little town of Bethlehem, the hopes and dreams of all the years are met in thee tonight.” We have come to **translate those words** into: Attempting to win the neighborhood house decoration contest by trying to string more lights on the eaves than the neighbors. Getting our Christmas cards and packages in the mail earlier this year, to meet the post office’s recommended deadline. Planning to watch every one’s favorite Christmas movie and making sure the Christmas cookies are baked. The “hopes and dreams of all the years” have a way of raising our stress levels as our idea of the perfect “Christmas” is being planned.

Where do we find hope in all of this? I believe that it is the essential work of Advent is remembering that Christmas is a gift from God that arrives whether we’re ready for it or not.

Today’s Gospel comes along in the lectionary every three years. But who really wants to hear about a fig tree or the signs of the end of time? Did you hear something new when you heard the ancient words today as Jesus paints a picture of that famous fig tree with tiny buds announcing that summer is just around the corner; as He reminds us that we are always waiting...as Jesus tells us to be alert and watch for signs, just like the servants awaiting the return of the homeowner, not knowing when he would arrive. “Stay at your post. Keep awake.”

What came to my mind was Isaiah’s prediction: "*Behold, I am doing a new thing.*" (Isaiah 43:19)

Rev. Lilian Daniel, Michigan Conference UCC Minister writes this: “Most of us do not need to be told to “keep awake” during Advent...we are already running on sleep deprivation.” She writes: The church has copied the rhythm of the world. And so, it is certainly for us: our programs are in *full speed ahead* mode: youth group, children’s activities, adult studies; visioning, planning to welcome a new pastor. The Advent scripture annoyingly presumes that we might all be *asleep*.

The thing is, that we, like people who live near the railroad tracks, who can sleep through whistles and engines rushing by, are the same ones who miss the most obvious and important Advent announcement ...**that Christ is coming again.**

Advent comes each year as a reminder that we need to raise our hopes, to practice peace-making, to raise one another’s spirits and share the love...while we watch and wait for **the coming of Christ** Advent reminds us to admit that we are wide awake to the world, but asleep to the spirituality of the season. Advent bids us to take a break...take a deep breath. And let it out! To focus.

If we are awake to God’s presence in the world...we will find that this is a way of being awake that might actually be restful and give us peace.

Neither those who awaited for the first coming of the Messiah, nor those who await his return, know when he will appear again. No one can predict it...even though it has been attempted many times.

Those who lived before Jesus was born lived in continual watchfulness. We, in 2023, know exactly when Christmas will arrive. (22 days) We know the script and can tell the story. We know the “*rest of the story*” as well: Who this baby will grow up to be. We know that he is not just the child in the manger. We know that when he was grown to be a man, he would make us all “new;” that he would give sight to a blind man and calm the storm with his hand; that because of him, the blind will see, the deaf will hear and the dead will live again! We know some of the words he has spoken by heart. We call him friend, prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, Good Shepherd, Son of God. He is the eternal love of us all. And we can trust Him!

For today, cling to this old, old story about God so loving the world that he gave his only son. May Advent this year reveal to us how God is still speaking and creating all around us.

Keep awake and alert as we become *filled up* with an unswerving joyful hope that can be found...in the waiting! Amen.

Benediction Go now...may these days of Advent find us unwrapping our hearts...so that we may more clearly see the presence of Christ in both friend and stranger. Watch. Wait. Wonder.

This hour’s worship has ended, let our service continue.

Pastor Mary Jo