

I read an article this week that was entitled, *Train Up a Child to Serve and Wait*. Upon reading the first sentence, I was hooked. It read, “No impulses run more counter to the scriptural admonition to love our neighbor as we love ourselves than the twin cultural idols of individualism and instant gratification. Not surprisingly, our twin idols account for a sharp rise in narcissism, one that a psychologist has dubbed ‘the Narcissism Epidemic.’ If you’re searching for a simple way to be countercultural, here it is: Train your children toward shared identity and self-sacrifice. Individualism says that I can and should do what’s best for me regardless of what’s best for others. Instant gratification assures me waiting is not a discipline to embrace but rather an enemy to eliminate” (Jen Wilkin, *Christianity Today*, Dec. 2023). This author continues, “Maturity is movement from me to us and from right now to not yet.” I was challenged by her questions: “How can we be trained in the virtue of waiting? How do we outgrow our entitlement and resist the narcissistic norms of our age? She concludes, “Want to be countercultural? Build a family identity around the Great Commandment as a strong antidote to the narcissistic spirit of the age” (Wilkin). Today is the first day in the season of Advent, the beginning of a new church liturgical year. Let us be clear. The church calendar is not the same as the world’s calendar. Advent is the deepest place in the church year and more than any other season, Advent invites us to practice the spiritual discipline of waiting. However, Advent for the world is a time of hustling and counting shopping days before Christmas. While the world’s busyness may seem to be pointed toward Christmas, it is seldom pointed toward the Christ child. And in Advent,

because we live in this world, many of us are indeed asleep to much of what matters. Like people who have lived by the train tracks for years, we no longer hear the sound of the train. After years in church, we get used to the noise of Advent, to the coming of Christ, so much so that we no longer notice it. Or if we do, it has ceased to jolt us awake and has become instead a low, dull rumble” (Lillian Daniel, *FOW*). Let’s turn to scripture for clues on how to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ.

The first Gospel reading of Advent from Mark describes a state of godless catastrophe we all wish we didn’t recognize in the world around us. What an odd way to usher in Advent but then again, is it? “We may not be physically asleep; quite the opposite. But in our wakefulness to worldly ways, we fall asleep to the spiritual season, and so we need a wake-up call from the Gospel of Mark” (Daniel). In the midst of life as they and we know it, Jesus reminds his disciples to make sure they pay attention and don’t get distracted by all the bad news. One quick key point of biblical interpretation: “taking scriptural language seriously does not mean taking it all literally. The Bible uses many dramatic images, metaphors and figures of speech for effect- for serious effect, to be sure, but not actual representation” (F. Scott Spencer, *Connections*). Before reading God’s word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ Mark 13:24-37.**

It's the end of the world as we know it; It's the end of the world as we know it; It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine (REM song,

End of the World). This text, known as the “little apocalypse” in comparison to the longer apocalypse, the Book of Revelation, can strike terror in the hearts of many of us. “The distance between our contemporary world and that of the early Christians, who expected Jesus’ imminent return, is nowhere more evident than here. What do we do with this apocalyptic language: the sun being darkened, the moon not giving light, the stars falling, and the Son of Man coming” (*Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, Year B*)? “Apocalyptic texts can function in part like disaster movies. They tell us that we can recognize the end-times, tell us what to do in the interim, and assure us that since we have the keys to survival, we will be among the elect and the saved” (A. J. Levine, *The Gospel of Mark*). According to Mark, the purpose of this text is to motivate us to be watchful and stay awake to God at work in the world. Jesus uses two parables to explain this. Yet, when it comes to today’s text, Christians often fixate on time. *When* will God come into the world bringing peace and justice? *When* are the last days? *When* will the apocalypse occur?

“Mark depicts that the Son of Humanity as the end-time redeemer and thus addresses the second coming. But no timetable is given. *That* Jesus will return is not in doubt for Mark, but *when* cannot be answered. Throughout Christian history, individuals have predicted the date of the end, and each time, they have failed. Note that when you read the entirety of this chapter Jesus’ main question is not the ‘when’ of the end-time, but the ‘how’ of living with this expectation” (Levine). “It is clear that Jesus does not intend for us to predict when he will return. Rather,

he is urging us to live as if his return were just around the corner” (Martin Copenhaver, *FOW*). This text, then, is also not so much about what *will* happen in the end of time as it is *how* to live between Christ’s first and second coming. In other words, **the end-time issue is not to predict the when, but to practice the how**: How does one live with both expectation of the end-times and knowledge that such times may not occur in this generation, or the next, or the next after that” (Levine)? Mark says that no one knows the day or the hour so “Keep alert for you do not know when the time will come.” And while we wait for Christ’s return **the how** is that Christ has given us a mission- to love God with all of ourselves and love our neighbor as ourselves. “At the same time, this text offers a warning. Maybe some of us have become complacent, and lackadaisical, thinking we have all the time in the world to do what Christ asks of us. Not so, says the Gospel writer. Life is short. So live in a way that makes a difference. Keep awake” (*Transforming Justice*)!

I don’t know about you all but I can become frustrated or cynical living in this in between where hope can become a grind. This morning I read another scholar’s take on this that I hadn’t heard before, and I offer it to you. She quoted a great medieval theologian (St. Bernard of Clairvaux) who once insisted that there were three Advents. He said, “*We know that the coming of the Lord is threefold,*” he preached. “*The first coming was in flesh and weakness, the middle coming is in spirit and power, and the final coming will be in glory and majesty.*” The middle Advent is the second of *three* Advents: 1) Jesus’ birth, 2) God coming into our lives, and 3) the final fulfillment. This theologian referred to the middle

Advent as the “road” between the already and the not-yet Advents. In this “middle,” or Second, Advent, God comes to us *now and here*, in the lives we have, a kind of inner Advent. “If you wish to meet God,” he said, “go as far as your own heart.” A student of this theologian (Thomas Merton) comments that “this middle or Second Advent by which Christ is present in our souls now, depends on our present recognition of...the passage of Christ through our world, through *our own lives*” (Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage* newsletter, 12.3.23).

This week two things come to mind when thinking of Christ in our lives: the first was watching former First Lady Rosalynn Carter’s funeral and hearing her grandson, Jason, offer the words, “My grandmother doesn’t need a eulogy. Her life was a sermon.” The second occurred at our Wednesday Bible Study where we were discussing the meaning of authentic “hope” for our faith, especially in times of struggle. One of the parishioners told the story of a time when she was really low. Her first husband was dying of cancer, and her church surrounded her. She began to stay alert and watch for what she calls “God sightings” - places where she experienced God’s presence; times when she witnessed God at work- even in a really difficult and painful season of her life. She shared that some people came and said horrible things that started with “maybe the reason your husband has cancer and is suffering is because...” And then she experienced Christ’s presence through members of her small church who came and sat with her and at times, said nothing but brought meals, encouraged her in her faith as she waited and watched her husband suffer greatly. She was encouraged by

her pastor to look for God sightings around her. To stay awake and aware enough to see God at work in her life, and she did. It took a while but as she waited, she began to see God at work through others in her community. Looking for these God sightings gave her and still gives her hope. Writer Anne Lamont says, "Hope is not logical. It always comes as a surprise, just when you think all hope is lost. Hope is the cousin to grief, and both take time: You can't short-circuit grief, or emptiness and you can't patch it up with your bicycle tire tube kit. You have to take the next right action. Jesus would pray on the mountain, or hang out with the poor or imprisoned, or -start doodling in the sand" (<https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/1011045735691736>).

Herein lies the difference between our cultural understanding of waiting and a biblical understanding of waiting. In scripture, we're invited to wait- not out of boredom- but in hope. The rush of instant gratification doesn't compare to the gratification of waiting for the Lord. According to Mark, "the best one can do is 'watch' and remain faithful and trust in divine mercy. The verdict of salvation is not up to us; it is up to God" (Levine). As followers of Christ, we're called to wait with a sense of promise- not out of fear or in anxiety- but out of trust in and gratitude for what God has done and continues to do through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Word of warning: "Faith, whenever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, **but is itself the unquiet heart** (*interesting, hope as the unquiet heart*). *Maybe an unquiet heart isn't the worst thing?* Those who hope...can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under

it, to contradict it. True hope means conflict with the world for the good of the promised future. Hope doesn't just whisper, 'It will be different,' it also shouts, 'It should be different' and ' it can be different.' In other words, hope doesn't just promise us that change will come in the future; it also changes who we are in the present. **It changes how we wait** (Jurgen Moltmann). Herein, lies our call to do justice while we wait. The church lives in Advent. That is to say, the church lives between these advents. Jesus Christ has come; Jesus Christ will come. In Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God is in head-on collision with the powers of darkness. The point of impact is where followers of Christ take their stand. For at any moment, the master himself may be the one who knocks- and we do not know what guise he will come in (Fleming Rutledge, *Advent Begins in the Dark*). As Pastor Amanda reminded us last week Jesus said, "In as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). In order to keep awake, we must ask ourselves, "How did we offer ourselves as a gift of presence this week?" "Who was a gift of presence to us this week?" Pinch yourselves. Wake up! For many of us are asleep. We must keep awake! "Pray and wait. Wait and pray. Stand at the crossroads of life and share hope like GHA's mural of eight people with stories of hope or like Christina's art piece- for deep in the gathering dark, something tender is forming. Something beautiful- something for the world's saving- waits to be born" (Debie Thomas, www.journeywithjesus.org). And as we actively wait, let us prepare our hearts for Christ's coming by being present with hope to those who need it most for hope calls us into

action based on a belief that things can and will be different. Thanks be to God! Amen.