

The season of Advent, traditionally defined as a season of penitence, preparation, and anticipatory hope, has in recent history been overcome by ever-earlier transitions into festivity. If the church were to follow the trends of the commercial realm, this season of waiting would have begun just prior to Halloween and ended around the time stores ran out of Thanksgiving-themed items, about two weeks later. In hopeful defiance of this particularly difficult year, many individuals and families have already decorated their homes with string lights and evergreen, and plenty of wreaths and ribbons have already adorned the streetlamps of our city centers. The hard-liners of the church calendar have begun grumpily posting on Facebook that Christmas is 12 days long and that none of those days fall in November, and the annual back and forth about whether Advent is appropriately purple or blue has commenced among Episcopalians. Starbucks has debuted their new red cups, and peppermint mochas are now available iced so that even unseasonably warm weather can't stop the festive season. As our own Brian Clardy pointed out in a post a couple of weeks ago, there are some very good reasons for folks to crave an early beginning to the celebratory season. Plenty of people are looking for a way to drown out the empty chairs around the Thanksgiving table, and this year hundreds of thousands of people have learned firsthand how tragically short life can be.

We are tired of waiting. We are fatigued by separation, by postponements and by disrupted livestream feeds and by the constant grief of missed opportunities and losses. A season dedicated to waiting is likely the last thing we think we need, as we are faced with a tightening of restrictions and the closure of schools and businesses. We have waited for the results of an election, we have waited for test results, we have waited for a vaccine. Our hearts are heavy with waiting.

Blessedly, on this feast of Christ our King, we are reminded what it is we are waiting for. Our waiting is given a meaning beyond the senseless losses and grief of these past months. Our impatient waiting gives way to Advent anticipation, to a sure and certain hope. The shepherd and monarch of our souls paints for us a picture of a world made right, of justice and mercy and grace. The ruler of our hearts takes up his mantle of teacher, and once again reveals to us what is possible with God, and what part we might play in this resurrected world.

In the context of a sermon, Jesus paints a picture for his disciples of the second coming, the final Advent of Christ. This return of the Son of Man will be one of great glory and splendor, of judgment and inheritance and restoration. The King, the ascended Jesus, will bring to himself the nations of the world, and will like a shepherd guide them to their rightful places before the night falls. Sheep and goats needed to be separated in the evening so that the goats with their less fulsome coats could be brought to shelter and warmth, while the better insulated sheep remained in the gated pasture overnight. The sheep in this painting of the throneroom of God represent the righteous children, and the goats are to be interpreted as the unrighteous. They are separated, like goats and sheep, to the place most suitable for them by the shepherd whose voice they know by heart.

The mixed metaphor of the glorified King and the gentle shepherd, the eternal punishment and the pastoral guidance is jarring to say the least. Linger on the last line of this passage might leave us anxious rather than joyful in our anticipation. Are we to look toward a future in which our reunion with the Incarnate Word is one of fear and the threat of rejection? If we are to conceive of the hope this Word from Jesus might offer us, it is necessary to take a step back, to take in the whole picture.

When the righteous are invited to their inheritance, Christ tells them that they are blessed because they have cared for him in his weakness, they have clothed and fed and nurtured him and shown him hospitality as a stranger and as a prisoner. These righteous ones are stunned to learn this, for looking back on their lives they cannot identify a moment when they might have hosted this exalted and glorious monarch before them. The unrighteous, similarly, cannot identify a moment when they would have missed the chance to do right by God when they encountered him on earth. Both the sheep and the goats are taken by surprise by their placement beside the throne, and without the guidance of the shepherd they cannot even distinguish between themselves and those on the opposite side. Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

The acts of mercy that the righteous worked in their lifetimes are those of Jesus, acts of healing and hospitality and loving care toward those on the margins of life. These are the fruits of the spirit, good works made possible by the grace of God and the outpouring of that Grace into the world. The righteous are taken by surprise because their acts in life were not intended to earn them a reward, nor were they resume builders for the final judgment. By feeding the hungry and quenching the thirsty, by welcoming the stranger and clothing the naked and visiting the prisoner, these children were simultaneously caring for Christ and witnessing the care of Christ in their own lives.

On the other hand, on the other side of the throne, the unrighteous find themselves aghast, not because they believe themselves to be infallible, but because they cannot identify a moment when they would have intentionally disregarded their savior. Their question is “When did we not do these things for YOU?” The unrighteous may have looked for Christ, but missed him when he was right in front of them. Perhaps the goats looked for Christ in the halls of power instead of in

the prisons power built. Perhaps the unrighteous looked for their King in the abundance but overlooked him in the famine. Perhaps their surprise betrays their motives, a lifetime of seeking personal salvation rather than a daily dedication to cultivating compassion.

As we step toward the anticipation of Advent, we face a dangerous moment. We are in danger if we hear this Gospel of the Lord as a judgment on our individuality, if we ponder just long enough to align ourselves either with the sheep or the goats. If we move into the season of preparation for the coming of Immanuel, God-with-us, having already decided if we are good or bad at locating him in our midst, we have already missed the mark. Remember that the goats and the sheep did not find their places by the throne on their own. The shepherd came to guide them. Remember that the righteous and the unrighteous will be equally surprised by their standing. We are always both, sheep and goats. We are always both striving for righteousness and battling against our own unrighteous yearnings. We are always both in desperate need of care and called to provide unreserved care to God's family. We are constantly both receiving the Gospel and charged with giving it away to others. Our standing in the throneroom is non-binary and not individualistic. Our participation in the systems that imprison and enslave and starve members of God's own family matters just as much as our dedication to works of mercy and compassion. This is what we must carry with us into the spiritual school of Advent. Christ our shepherd and our teacher has given us the map to reach him, the steps we must take to encounter him sacramentally, even when the sacraments of the church are out of our reach. Our season of waiting need not be defined by absence and silence. You gave me food. You gave me something to drink. You welcomed me. You clothed me. You took care of me. You visited me. Christian anticipation is not passive, it is entirely defined by action and participation. Do not be taken by surprise. Be taken by love.