

The Reverend's Ruminations

Wow, can it be that December is already upon us? After a cold (and unexpectedly snowy) early November, the relatively mild temperatures of the second half of the month have kind of lulled us back to thinking that we have a few more weeks before we need to think about Christmas preparations!?! Despite what seemed like endless weather issues during spring and summer, our area did see God at work in a harvest that many feared would not happen. I pray that by the time you are reading this, you have had a relaxing time gathered with family or friends to offer thanks for the blessings you experienced this year.

As we jump headlong into the church season of Advent beginning December 1st, both our epistle and gospel lessons speak of being aware of (and prepared for) something big on the horizon. What *could* it possibly be? Black Friday sales and the opportunity to buy the perfect gift for everyone in your life? Generic holiday parties or big family gatherings featuring calorie-laden comfort foods and sweet treats of every kind? Endless sappy Hallmark movies on TV or continuous Christmas music variations on the radio? The arrival of a mythical, overweight man in a red and white suit bearing gifts for good girls and boys? If you look at the world outside of church this time of year, it's almost hard to pinpoint what all the excitement and anticipation is all about!?!

Our first gospel lesson of the season, Matthew 24:36-44, speaks mysteriously at the outset, teasing that *"...about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."* Jesus' own words, recalled by Matthew continue, chiding us: *"Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."* Finally he concludes, *"Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."* (verses 36, 42, 44) At this point in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is the one speaking—not about his own birth at Christmas, but about his second coming (understood to herald the end of the world, and the final resurrection).

The apostle Paul, writing to his young congregation in Rome in our first epistle lesson of the Advent season, also speaks of Christ's return as he encourages his congregation and ours, *"Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers..."* (Romans 13:11) It may have sounded like Paul was speaking of Christ's birth, but the remainder of his appeal is placed firmly in the time after Christ's earthly journey, calling us to put on the life and teachings of Jesus as our way of life while we await his return.

So are we "anticipating" the return of a heavenly judge and the impending judgement of all sinners before the throne of God? Or is the "anticipation" of Advent a season in the Christian year, one in which we recall the prophecies, promises, and events leading up to the birth of a blessed baby in a stable in the town of Bethlehem? Survey says... YES!

Advent is the church's season of preparation for the annual celebration of Christ's birth, known as Christmas. But the words of both the apostle Paul and Jesus himself remind us that our Christian anticipation shouldn't end with another birthday party on the 25th of December. We recall—with hope, peace, joy, and love—that our faith is in a Savior who came to earth as a babe in a manger. But he didn't stay there. He grew like all children do, and in accordance with God's plan he taught, healed, comforted, confronted, and eventually went to the cross to take away our sin. As we affirm in our various creeds, he was buried, and on the third day rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

As you anticipate the various trappings that have come to be included in the buildup of Advent, don't get lulled into thinking that one holiday is the extent of our Christmas celebration. Christ came to save, and will come again in glory. Anticipation naturally ebbs and flows in our lives, but let us not put it away with the Christmas decorations when the new year rolls around! Make preparations to celebrate again the blessing of Christ's birth, but may our hearts and minds also be continually be open to glimpses of the kingdom to come, and alert to the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. Gloria in excelsis Deo!

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Cory Germain