

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
November 28, 2009 – First Sunday of Advent

It Ends With God
Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

What a relief – it's almost December! Not that December isn't a crazy time of year - getting ready for special church services, holiday performances and pageants, and, of course, Christmas itself. But at least December's the right month to enjoy Christmas decorations, Christmas carols, and Christmas shopping. I had to roll my eyes when I saw Christmas decorations start to go up at Costco last August. I had to grit my teeth when I actually heard Christmas music on the radio before I had an opportunity to enjoy Halloween, let alone Thanksgiving. But now, *finally*, I can turn my full attention to Christmas.

Or can I?

Actually, the Christian calendar asks us to put the brakes on for just a while longer. Just as we shouldn't get to Easter before going through Good Friday, we shouldn't get to Christmas before going through Advent. Advent is a time for waiting, which is very difficult for us to do.

Waiting reminds me of one of my favorite books, Oh, the Places You'll Go! This book is basically a graduation speech by Dr. Seuss, where he addresses the ups and downs of life. He begins with high hopes:

Congratulations! Today is your day.

You're off to Great Places!

You're off and away! ...You'll be on your way up! You'll be seeing great sights! You'll join the high fliers who soar to high heights.

He also ends it with an encouraging note:

And will you succeed? Yes! You will, indeed!

(98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.)

But in the middle of his book, Dr. Seuss talks about the times in life when Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to us. He also talks about the dreaded Waiting Place:

The Waiting Place...for people just waiting.

Waiting for a train to go

or a bus to come, or a plane to go

or the mail to come, or the rain to go

or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow

or waiting around for a Yes or No

or waiting for their hair to grow.

Everyone is just waiting..

William L. Self says that Advent is the waiting place. “This place called Advent prepares us for God's surprise and joy. This is what it did for Nelson Mandela who spent 27 years - 10,000 days -- as a political prisoner in South Africa. During this waiting time, the revolution was shaping. Discontent with apartheid was brewing in the soul of a country. Twenty-seven years of waiting and wondering, 10,000 nights of loneliness and separation, 27 years of deprivation and humiliation. But in that waiting place strength and focus, vision and determination were forged so that when the apartheid system fell, he emerged to preside over a free nation. ‘It was during those long and hungry years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. When I walked out of prison, I knew my mission to liberate the oppressor and the oppressed,’ he said.”¹

Although we don't have to spend 27 years in prison waiting, to wait is challenging for us, because, as Walter Breuggemann says, “Advent, more than any other season in the church year, is most powerfully contradicted by the socioeconomic practices in our society.”²

¹ This sermon is from *Defining Moments*, written by William L. Self, published 1999 by CSS Publishing Company, Lima, Ohio.

² Walter Breuggemann, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2007.

Theodore J. Wardlaw states that “Advent...is played out against the backdrop of conspicuous consumerism.”³ Our culture isn’t interested in preparing the way for God – it’s way more interested in self-indulgently satisfying our inner shopper. That’s why Wardlaw thinks that “Rarely is the church called upon to be more countercultural than during Advent.”

Genesis states that everything begins with God. Advent reminds us that everything will also end with God. The One who we’re preparing for during Advent is not only the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger, but also the Son of Man who will come on the clouds of heaven at the end of time. Hence, in our text from Matthew for this First Sunday of Advent, “the scale of things is appropriately cosmic and the tone is apocalyptic.” (Wardlaw)

But we’re not yet at the end of time. Douglas Hare says there are two fundamental concerns early Christians faced which are relevant for all Christians even today: When will Jesus come in glory, and what are we to do in the meantime?

In answer to the first question, Jesus says no one but God the Father knows the day and hour when Jesus will return, so don’t waste time trying to figure it out.

³ Theodore J. Wardlaw, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2007.

However, he instructs his followers to wait *expectantly*, to be constantly on watch, like an owner of a house waiting for a thief to break in. The analogy of Christ's return being like a thief in the night is an important one, and we find it also used in 1 Thessalonians 5:2. The imagery itself implies an arrival at an unexpected or surprising time, hence the exhortation to stay awake.

Ben Witherington tells a story of the days before cell phones (B.C. as he likes to call them). His grandparents used to call his family up and tell them they were coming for a visit. Since they sometimes stopped various places along the way, they were not sure when they would arrive. This meant they had to always be awake and ready. It was the certainty of the coming, not the timing which motivated this behavior of being ready at any moment. So it is as well in Jesus' exhortation in today's gospel.

In answer to the second question, Jesus teaches that we're to be like the good slave whom the master will find at work when he arrives. Tom Long states, "What vigilance and readiness means is that the church must *always* be about the mission of Jesus in the world, preaching and teaching the gospel, showing mercy, working for justice, laboring for righteousness, never relaxing its intent to work toward God's coming victory."⁴

Now the work of discipleship and mission is not an easy thing to do. It's difficult under any circumstances, but it's especially hard when day after day passes and nothing seems to happen. There's a bumper sticker that

⁴ Tom Long, Westminster Bible Companion, Matthew.

reads, “Jesus is coming soon. Look busy!” It’s one thing to be busy about God’s work if Jesus is indeed coming soon. But it’s different when there seems to be no end in sight. That’s why it’s so important and vital that the life of discipleship is lived together with other Christians, so that we can provide encouragement and hope to one another and help everyone keep watch for the sudden appearance of God.

In the meantime, knowing that the Son of Man is coming some day reminds us that our lives have purpose and direction, and it helps us to remember what is really important in life and what is truly secondary. As Long put it, “If the dam twenty minutes upstream breaks, then the Rembrandt on the wall is less valuable than the rubber raft in the attic.” Knowing what lies ahead clarifies what to value, and not value, in the here and now.

Theodore Wardlaw tells the story of a prominent African-American pastor who served a large and powerful church in Harlem, above 125th Street in New York City. From its gothic spire, one could see just about anything one would want to see. Or, to put it more accurately, one could see just about everything one would *not* want to see: blocks of burned-out buildings, shabby little pawn shops and boarded-up storefronts and roach-infested

grocery stores, in the shadows of which prostitutes and crack dealers plied their trades.

Many churches had given up and moved elsewhere, but that church just continued to hang in there – keeping watch, staying alert, as if every moment mattered! They organized a locally-owned bank (so the neighborhood could *have* a bank), they set up latch-key programs for children, they put together neighborhood redevelopment agencies, they set up Bible studies in high-rises, they conducted successful boycotts against price-gouging corporations. But still, it was Harlem.

A newspaper reporter once interviewed this pastor. “Sure,” he said as he framed one question, “you’re doing great stuff. But it’s hard to see what difference any of that is making. What enables you and your folks to keep going?” The pastor said, “We’ve read the Bible, and we know how it ends. We aren’t at the end yet,” he went on, “but we know how it ends, and that’s what makes the difference.”⁵

We, too, know how it ends. It ends with God! And so, on this first Sunday of Advent, we worship the God who helps us see the world not only as it is, but as it might be. We worship the God who helps us wait

⁵ Theodore J. Wardlaw, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2007.

expectantly for his return by feeding us the bread and the cup of the table, foreshadowing the heavenly banquet which awaits us. We worship the God who is at both the beginning and the end of time.

Remember how it ends and you'll know what's important now.

In other words, keep awake, for you know how it ends. Amen.