

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

To Advent or not, that is the question. The word advent means awaiting the arrival of an important or notable person. The season of Advent traditionally celebrated in Protestant congregations represents the four Sundays prior to Christmas in which we anticipate the arrival of Christ. We decorate our sanctuaries in blue, the color of hope, the hope that Christ the savior brings as a gift to the world. Today marks the beginning of Advent. We have the lighting of the first candle on the Advent wreath and we begin our time of watching and waiting with great anticipation for the birth of the Christ child. This week as I gathered with colleagues to study and examine our Advent texts I found myself in the midst of a heated discussion with one question at the center; should the church continue to celebrate the season of Advent or is it just another way in which the church is disconnected from the world?

In each congregation I've been a part of, whether it was my home congregation, my internship congregation, my first call, or even here at Salem there are two camps of people, those for the season of Advent and those against it. The people who are for Advent, they want to abstain from singing any Christmas carols and they believe there shouldn't be a Christmas decoration to be found in the building until Christmas Eve. They believe that we as a church are called to be countercultural and different as we await the second coming. And then we have those on the other side of the fence, those who want to go ahead and start celebrating Christmas as soon as the turkey roasters are placed back in the cabinets. They believe thanksgiving is over so why not put up the trees and turn on the lights and sing the carols. Both groups feel very passionately about their choice and both groups think they are right. More often than not all that ends up happening is arguing over when to start singing Christmas carols or when to put up the

Christmas tree and of course there always a lot of sermons about what the real reason for the season should be.

So, who's right? Should we Advent or should we not? I can still remember waiting for Christmas Eve to arrive when I was a little girl. I was spell bound by the Christmas lights that twinkled in the darkness. I was mesmerized by the trees adorned with ornaments that glittered. I was filled with anticipation as we wrote our letters to Santa, baked Christmas cookies and whoopee pies and wrapped Christmas presents. And I had absolute ants in my pants as we set out our luminaries and watched Christmas movies waiting for the 11:00 Christmas Eve service at church. I couldn't wait to light the candles and have happiness fill my heart because I knew what would come next. We would go home and open our presents. What I couldn't wait for was to find out what was inside those shiny boxes with beautiful bows or what would be placed under the Christmas tree and fill my stocking. It was the anticipation, surprise and expectancy. It was knowing that for one evening nothing else in the world mattered.

You and I, we know what will happen on Christmas. We know that Joseph and Mary will travel by foot and on a donkey to Bethlehem where there will be no room in the Inn. We know that the Innkeeper will offer the stable for them to take a rest. And in that little stable filled with every day ordinary farm animals, in the dark of night, Mary will give birth to Jesus, the Savior of the world. We know that peace that comes with a dark sanctuary filled with lit candles. We know that in the shadow of the manger stands the cross. We know the rest of the story. We are Jesus followers and we hear God's story of Jesus breaking into creation every year, so what is the point of Advent? What is the point of the waiting? What is it that we are preparing for?

Year B, the new church year we have just begun focuses the lectionary alternating between the gospel of Mark and the gospel of John. In the gospel of Mark, he doesn't spend too

much time thinking about the second coming. We don't hear much about anticipation or worry when it will be. Instead Mark invites us to ask the question, "Where is God breaking in and entering into our lives right now?" He invites us to think of the coming of Christ in the world that we live in, in the lives that we share with our family and friends. Mark wants us to think about Jesus being here among us now, the ways that the cross and the manger show up for us today. You see, we have an advantage over those who were there for the first Christmas. We know that we worship a living, breathing Messiah...not just on Christmas Eve, but every single day of the year. Mark wants you to think and focus on seeing him now, in the present, not some day in a far off galaxy. For Mark the waiting for Jesus to arrive is over. He's here now to redeem the world.

On that first Christmas, Jesus came to the world as it was. God didn't wait for the world to be the people they wanted to be or even the people they promised to be. In the same way God comes to us now just as we are. He's not waiting for us to lose those extra fifteen pounds or reconcile our relationship with our estranged relative or friend. He's not waiting on the church to be perfect or our congregation to be what we could only dream it to be. He's not waiting for our nation or the world to have peace. God is coming now. He's working in your life now.

So perhaps the waiting for the arrival of Jesus, of God to appear in our lives is self-inflicted. Maybe we are holding off recognizing the presence of God right in our very midst because we are focused on the wrong things. We are focused on what our neighbor is doing and whether it is right or wrong. Or we are worried about getting the right presents for Christmas or what we will have to eat. Or we are focused on people being placed in certain boxes and what's wrong with them if they aren't in the boxes we put them in. Or we are worried about the things of yesterday and why the world is different now. We are so busy worrying and so distracted by

the things in the world that we forget to look for Jesus when in fact he's been next to us the whole entire time, holding our hand and loving us in our flaws.

So should we Advent or should we not; that is the question. And I guess the secondary question that follows is, does the Christmas music and the gift shopping and the cookie baking distract us from Christ or help us to see his presence in our imperfections more clearly? Because for Mark, that is the heart of the matter, being able to recognize Christ in the mundane right now, not only on December 25th.

For me, I never feel closer to Christ than in my Christmas preparation; which as a member of the clergy who is so busy in December I don't have time to do Christmas, usually begins in the beginning of November. I listen to Christmas carols because they help me to recognize Christ in a world that's hurting and give me peace and hope in the midst of the turmoil. I look at the twinkle lights glistening in the darkness and my heart sees Jesus breaking through in my deepest and darkest valleys. For me, preparing for Christmas is just as holy as the arrival of Christ because I know the rest of the story. Jesus is alive and among us now.

So whether you are a liturgical purest or not, I invite you today as does the author of the gospel of Mark, to look around you. See where God is present right now. We are an Advent people, not just for the four Sundays before Christmas, but all year through. We are to be watching and waiting constantly, so that we may always have the peace in knowing that God comes to us where we are and loves us no matter what. Amen.