

The Time Will Come

Scriptures: Isaiah 64:1-4
Mark 13: 24-37

Today marks the end of my time with you here at Sudbury, the end of my interim (or temporary supply) pastorate, whichever it was. As I've pulled my thoughts together this week to say what I want to leave you with, it's seemed a strange timing, to be ending at the beginning, at the beginning of a new year in the Church, the beginning of the season of Advent, the beginning of a season of expectation and hope.

On the one hand, it's a strange time of year to talk about beginnings and hope. Regardless of the fact that this is my last Sunday at Sudbury, to us who live here in Massachusetts, it indeed feels more like an end than a beginning: the end of the Fall, the end of the year, the end of light. The light of day is waning, a deep blue sky turns to darkness by 4:30 p.m., and we can look forward to fourteen hour-long nights and living in a dim, cold world for the next several months. Not a warm, cheery prospect exactly, so why all the talk about beginnings, why all the fuss about holidays, why all the rush to decorate our homes, and shop at the malls? Is it a binge of denial, an attempt to ignore what is the natural reality of endings and darkness around us? What a strange time of year! Advent flies in the face of reason.

But that's just it. Advent makes no sense, at one level. It's out of synch with where we're at. Yet at the next level deeper, it makes all the sense in the world. What better time of year than at the end to anticipate the beginning? What better moment to light a candle, than just when it's getting the darkest? What more appropriate season in which to hope, than when we're headed into the dark blue night of winter?

Yes, today is the First Sunday of Advent, and our liturgical theme is "*watch.*" The time has come to begin our four weeks of waiting for Christmas, to anticipate Christ's birth once again, and to look forward to the light of his presence and his eventual return to earth. So here we are with the Advent wreath. Each Sunday as we progress through Advent you'll notice that an additional candle of the wreath is lit. Where does this tradition come from?

As Gordon Lathrop writes in his Proclamation Commentary, the Advent wreath is "*probably the most widely used liturgical emblem for our waiting*" at this season of anticipating Christ's coming. "*The wreath is most likely, at origin, an old pagan solstice-time symbol. A wagon wheel was hung up and decorated with greens that pointed to the hope for the returning summer by being brought indoors. These greens were used to enact the 'midwinter protest.' They may even have been intended to work a little 'sympathetic magic': to encourage and cause vegetation again to appear. Candles or torches were affixed to the wheel. As the darkness grew so did the number of lighted torches, until at last, at the solstice itself, a full circle of such lights was aflame... The circle of light was a little 'sun', the burning orb, shining in midwinter.*"

Lathrop explains how this pagan symbol from northern Europe was incorporated into Christians' practice of Advent watching for the return of Christ: "*Christians, too...*" he writes, "*brought the burning wheel into their homes and churches. Usually they have reduced the number of candles to four, letting them stand for the Sundays of Advent. Then, if the greens and the growing circle represent the ancient human waiting for light, the burning candles themselves – even when there is only one – speak of the light of Christ already present in the midst of our waiting... The wreath... is one of the strongest symbols we have for the old solstice hopes. The slow completing of the circle of light has no name or text but this: the ancient human hope for the sun. Hung in the room of assembly, of preaching and sacrament, the wreath calls that hope to transformation through the word and presence of God, the burning light 'which goes not down.'*"¹

As we think of our Scripture lessons for today, we come face to face with this call to watchfulness, in both the Old and New Testaments:

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," cries the prophet Isaiah. In ancient times, the Hebrews were desperate for God to deliver them from political oppression by foreign powers. They longed for the day that God would intervene on their behalf and usher in a new era of redemption. They were watching for a new beginning, and the upsetting of the old order, the radical intervention of the one true God, who had intervened in the past to deliver them from slavery in Egypt and had given them a Promised Land. Their memory of this former divine intervention sustained them through the dark years they currently were experiencing, and was their sole source of hope for the future.

The New Testament lesson is even more apocalyptic in its tone:

"After the suffering (the time of tribulation) the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." This is hardly "business as usual," or more of the same. It's a cosmic upheaval predicted by Christ, part of the anticipation of a time that will come when the universe, as we know it, and all life itself, will be overturned by God's power. At first hearing, it's a frightening oracle. The Gospel of Mark is the earliest written of the four gospels, and its style is abrupt and hard-hitting. It grabs the hearer's attention, and can shake us to the core. Christ is a radical prophet and miracle worker, in Mark's gospel. His identity as the Messiah is to be kept a secret by his disciples, and his divine nature is shrouded in mystery. Chapter 13 is referred to as the "Little Apocalypse," made up of several seemingly independent and self-contained sections. Taken altogether it can scare the pants off anyone who reads the whole thing.

Yet the message we should focus on from Mark 13 this Sunday is contained in the last section, verses 32 – 37: that no one knows the timing of this cosmic cataclysm, and that therefore our role as Christians is to wait faithfully and be watchful at all times.

"Beware, keep alert," Christ says to his disciples, *"for you do not know when the time will come...in the evening, or at midnight or at cock crow or at dawn... And what I*

say to you I say to all: Keep awake!"

There are many current-day prophets and seers predicting the imminent demise of our world. Just look at the headlines on any of the tabloid newspapers as you stand in the supermarket check out line this holiday season. If anxiety over North Korea or the Trump administration hasn't already made you lie awake at night, glancing at these dire predictions of asteroid collisions and seers' portents of the end of time could send you right over the edge!

Yet we need to keep in mind Christ's words of caution, that no one, not even him, knows the timing of that coming cosmic event. He apparently expected it would come in his own original disciples' lifetime. And now, 2,000 years later, we still are here, waiting and watching. If Christ, by his own admission, didn't know when the time would come, then how have all these other people managed to calculate it correctly? Come on now! Are the Star and the National Enquirer more reliable than the Bible? We need to accept the mystery surrounding Mark's gospel, and focus not on the timing of the Second Coming, but on the good news contained in its prophecies.

In Advent we are called to watch and wait for the Second Coming of Christ. Just as we remember the love of God shown to all the world in his First Coming as the Babe of Bethlehem, so we look forward to his Second Coming, whenever that will be, knowing that our loving God will bring all things to completion in a way far surpassing our ability to comprehend or predict. What we can be sure of, is that if we stay alert and do what we are called to do as Christ's disciples, living our lives guided by our faith in him, we will have nothing to fear on that day, whenever and however it arrives.

In a few moments we will participate together in communion, our celebration of Christ's nourishing presence in our lives. As we take the bread and the cup, we remember how he gave his body and blood, his very life, for us. It is this loving, present, life-giving God, a God who broke into the fabric of our dark and dismal world to bring us salvation through his son, who revealed his real intentions for us in history, whom we remember and incorporate in the sharing of communion. And it's this same God, not some cosmic destroyer bent on our destruction, whom we watch and wait for with hope during this season of Advent.

So that's why we light our candle in the darkness today. That's why during these next Sundays we'll focus on preparing, rejoicing and proclaiming. Because it's good news we're anticipating in this dark and fear-filled world. It's a loving God who's coming to us once again. It's the promise of a time that will come, a time when what's wrong will be set right, a time when the mystery surrounding The One "*no eye has seen or ear has heard*" will vanish, a great and glorious time when God in all his majesty and power will reign supreme.

Yes, the time will come. So let's watch and wait and look forward to that day together as together we join once more in sharing this heavenly feast which our Lord has prepared.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

1. Gordon A. Lathrop, in Proclamation 4: Aids for Interpreting the Lessons of the Church Year: Advent-Christmas, Series B, Advent 1.