

Christ Is Coming Again
Mark 13:28-37
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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The first Sunday in Advent, according to the Church calendar, is also the beginning of the new Christian year. The name Advent comes from the Latin word “adventus” which means “coming” or “arrival.”

The origins of Advent go way back to the sixth century AD. Advent started out as a six-week season of self-examination and fasting before Christmas Day. By the 10th century, Advent was shortened to four weeks and, like Lent, was given the liturgical color purple symbolizing introspection and repentance. Then, way after the Reformation, the Protestant denominations rediscovered Advent and added the theme of joy to this holy season.

Advent as originally conceived, was not about getting yourself ready for Christmas Day, but for Christ himself; and not just his first coming, but especially his Second Coming when he will come again in glory to restore the eternal Kingdom.

Unfortunately, the intentional introspective journey to Bethlehem has been waysided by the mad dash to December the 25th. Prayerful meditation has given way to mindless hyperactivity. Instead of becoming spiritually one with Christ and our neighbor we’ve become more disconnected and isolated than ever. Like a black hole in outer space, December the 25th has sucked out the therapeutic nature of Advent that feeds the soul.

“Don’t let this happen to you!” is the recurring themes of many Advent sermons. “Don’t make a Martha Steward Christmas instead keep a Christ centered Christmas!” Catch the difference? Instead of making Christmas, you keep Christmas. How? Keeping Christmas really means keeping Christ. That’s what separates Christmas from December the 25th. That’s also what keeps Advent from becoming the official count down of the number of shopping days before Christmas.

Think of it this way. “Making” Christmas is mechanical; “Keeping” Christmas is organic. “Making” Christmas is carelessly going through the motions, “Keeping” Christmas is carefully moving towards Christ. “Making” Christmas is draining, Keeping Christmas, fulfilling. “Making” Christmas is getting ready for a date on the calendar. “Keeping” Christmas is preparing yourself to step into the flow of eternity.

When Jesus warned his disciples, “Be aware, keep alert for you do not know when the time will come,” he wasn’t telling them to get ready for Christmas Day, but be ready for the Coming of the Son of Man and the establishment of his Kingdom. The time will come, Jesus taught, when heaven will overwhelm the earth and make all things beautiful and new. The broken, sinful world system will be unconditionally overthrown, never again to regain control. The rightful King will come, claim his throne and rule forever.

In his book *Exploring Revelation*, John Phillips likens Christ’s return to King Richard the Lionhearted, reclaiming his throne from his incompetent, wicked brother, Prince John. If you’ve seen the 1938 movie Robin Hood starring Errol Flynn, you know the story.

King Richard, returning from the Crusades was captured by his enemies and held for ransom until his release. When he finally returned home he found his subjects were horribly abused under John's corrupt rule. Naturally the people rejoiced when Richard sent John packing. Phillips concluded, "One day a King greater than Richard will lay claim to a realm greater than England. Those who abused the earth in His absence, seized his domains and mismanaged his world will be swept aside."

Ultimately this is what Christmas is all about, the birth of Christ and the promise of his Kingdom forever and firmly established. But since Christ's Kingdom is not of this world it's essential we stay alert and keep watch because it can easily be overlooked and even opposed by good people who won't know what they're doing because they haven't reoriented themselves to Christ.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth leaves you know that summer is near. So also, when you see things taking place, you know he is near, at the very gates." (Mark 13:28-29)

If you're alert and consistently in a pattern of awareness, you'll be able to sense whenever Christ comes near. Learning how to live each day with a deepening knowledge of Christ's presence is a realistic goal. With a little practice it can become a permanent habit that enhances your quality of life, because you start doing what you were born to do: spending every day seeking God in every person you meet and every situation you encounter. So be alert, Christ is coming, in more ways than one.

Here's what I mean: Advent "coming" has multiple expressions in the past tense, the present tense and the future tense and all three tenses interact with each other. At Christmas we realize Christ's first coming changed everything. No one, even the hardened atheist, can deny Jesus of Nazareth impacted humanity as no one else ever could. Jesus changed history, changed lives, changed the world. More important from a faith perspective we also believe Christ's sacrifice on the cross conquered death and sin and reconciled the world back to God. So during Advent we look back to the past tense and remember how his first coming changed everything.

Then Advent coming is expressed in a second way: Christ comes to us daily in the present tense. He comes inviting us to blend our suffering with his own thereby making our suffering redemptive. He also comes to make our joy complete whenever we have reason to celebrate life by taking our celebration to a higher caliber and a deeper dimension. Christ comes each day to inspire us to do and be our best as parents, children, employers and employees, friends and neighbors. And certainly Christ visits us in the present tense regularly urging us to be a friend and helper to those who need both.

So Christ comes to us in the past, Christ comes to us in the present and Christ will come again in the future. No one knows how and when this will happen. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Mark 13:32) Over the centuries ongoing speculation, some serious, some manipulative and some downright ridiculous, has kept the Church wondering when the world will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds. Some in the Church take Christ's prediction literally, others metaphorically, but all take it seriously. Christ will come again so in Jesus' own words, "Keep awake."

It would be helpful to remember the context of this teaching. It was Holy Week, when Jesus gathered his disciples just outside Jerusalem's temple, the epicenter of the powerful Jewish religious establishment. Knowing his crucifixion was hours away there

must have been a hint of urgency in his voice. The Kingdom of God was at hand, but the world, stiffening its resistance, made the future unpredictable and dangerous.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.” We still live in an unpredictable and dangerous world. With the economy imploding, unemployment rates rising and investments tanking, we’re all anxious about the future. Simultaneously the threat of terrorism is still looming, crime is increasing, families are breaking up, there are fears of epidemics, need I go on?

Advent arrives as the days grow shorter and the enveloping darkness takes over. How else can you explain the importance of candles and Advent wreaths in the Medieval Church? Lighting a candle defeats the darkness and reminds us the true Light has come into the world and the darkness cannot overcome it. The evergreen wreaths reminded the stalwart Medieval Christians the Kingdom promises continuous life. Laurel wreaths symbolized Christ’s victory over suffering; pine and holly wreaths, immortality; cedar wreaths, strength and healing. The circle of all these wreaths, with no beginning or end, symbolized the eternity of God, and eternal life through Christ. Even the candles of the Advent wreath have a specific significance. The center candle represents Christ, the light of the world, to be lit on Christmas Eve. The purple candles symbolize prayer, penance and good works, the rose candle, symbolizes joy and hope.

The Medieval Church chose the perfect time for Advent and Christmas. What better time to discover joy, hope, everlasting life and Christ himself than when the world grows cold and dark?

Like Christ’s disciples and later Medieval Christians, Christians today around the world face a dark and uncertain future. But there’s good news: Christ who reigns in eternity beyond time and space continuously comes into our world yesterday, today and tomorrow. So be alert, keep Christ and prepare yourselves; so when Christ comes near you’ll be ready to receive the blessing you need to do and be your best for God, your neighbor and yourself.