

The First Sunday of Advent
Jer. 33:14-16; 1 Thess. 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Active Waiting*

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I recently came across an article on the web entitled “Ten New York City stereotypes that are completely accurate.”

Some were pretty funny, like “New Yorkers are always right, even when they’re wrong.” Others were pretty spot on, like “New Yorkers are always in a rush.” But the one stereotype that really resonated for me was that New Yorkers are always impatient.

We live in a culture in which instant gratification is the norm. There’s an app for getting just about anything almost instantly. You want a car right now? Use Uber. You want a meal right now? Use Seamless. You want a date right now? Use Tinder.

Even the Christmas season begins earlier and earlier each year. This year’s Starbucks red holiday cup controversy started shortly after Halloween. The midtown department store holiday windows have long since been unveiled. As one of my friends recently posted to Twitter: “I still don’t understand why Christmas starts the day after Thanksgiving.”

Even my own household is not immune to this phenomenon. This past Thursday, I preached at the Thanksgiving Day mass here at Transfiguration. Michael stayed at home to do some errands. When I got back to our apartment, I found him busily putting out our Christmas decorations. “We haven’t even had our turkey yet,” I said. “Yes, but it’s almost Advent,” he replied.

Today is Advent Sunday – the first Sunday in Advent – and the beginning of a new liturgical year. Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “coming.” Since at least the sixth century, Advent has been a time of preparation for the coming of Christ.

During Advent, we actually wait for two comings of Christ. The first coming is from the past – we wait for Christmas to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus from over two thousand years ago. The second coming is in the future – we wait for the Last Judgment and the eschatological return of Christ at the end of time. (Eschatology is just a fancy theological word that means the study of “last things.”)

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Advent is deeply countercultural to the extent that it emphasizes a spirituality of waiting. Whether it's the lighting of a new Advent candle each Sunday for four weeks, or whether it's the practice of opening up an Advent calendar one day at a time, Advent teaches us to wait.

Today's gospel reading from Luke is about a spirituality of waiting. Jesus tells us that the second coming will be ushered in with apocalyptic events, including signs in the heavens and distress on earth. To that end, Jesus teaches us to be "alert at all times." We must not be "weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." Instead, we must pay attention to signs, just as the fig tree sprouts leaves to announce the coming of summer. We must actively wait and be fully present to each moment.

Henri Nouwen, the late Roman Catholic priest and writer, has written about the spirituality of waiting. He says, "Waiting is not popular. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time. . . . For many people, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go. And people do not like such a place."

Nouwen notes that most people think of waiting as "something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands." But in fact, scripture teaches us that waiting is an active process. According to Nouwen, the "secret of waiting is the faith that [a] seed has been planted, that something has begun." And so, "[a]ctive waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening."

The branch imagery from today's Hebrew Bible reading is a powerful symbol of active waiting. The Jeremiah passage promises us that the coming of the Messiah will be like a "righteous Branch" that will "spring up for David" and "execute justice and righteousness in the land." As Nouwen says, the seeds of this branch – like the fig tree in the gospel – have already been planted. It is our job to wait actively for the Lord's coming – and to be fully present in each moment.

Holly Whitcomb, a UCC minister and retreat director, has written a marvelous little book called *Seven Spiritual Gifts of Waiting*. In a chapter called "Living in the Present," Whitcomb writes that the "secret gift of waiting" is paying attention to the "little things" and noticing "what needs to be done." She says, "[w]aiting invites us to recognize Jesus and his call to faithfulness in the most ordinary moments of life."

Indeed, it is this attentiveness that will allow us to "increase and abound in love for one another and for all," as St. Paul writes in today's epistle reading from First Thessalonians. We certainly could use more love in this world, particularly in light of the recent news headlines that recall the apocalyptic events described in today's gospel – from global terrorism alerts to domestic mass shootings to the continued killing of young Black lives in our streets – including, most recently, seventeen-year-old Laquan McDonald.

There certainly has been “distress among nations” in recent days, and many people have experienced great “fear and foreboding.” More than ever, we need God’s grace to – in the words of the Collect of the Day – “cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light.” Only with this grace can we gather the courage and strength to “stand up and raise [our] heads,” as Jesus teaches us to do in today’s gospel.

I want to close by noting that Advent Sunday is a day of many changes. Today we change from the old year to the new. We change from green vestments to violet ones. We change from lectionary Year B (with readings from Mark) to Year C (with readings from Luke). We change from the daily office Year 1 to Year 2. And we change from a season of ordinary time to a season of expectation and preparation.

During this Advent season, I invite us to make another change: to change from a life of instant gratification to a spirituality of active waiting. Instead of getting frustrated when we wait in line at the post office, the grocery store, the doctor’s office, the subway platform, or even Starbucks, let us practice looking for the signs of the fig tree and the righteous branch in the everyday moments of our lives.

Let us hold off on Christmas – at least for a little while. And let us wait together during Advent to welcome Christ into the world and into our hearts.