

The First Sunday of Advent
Luke 21:25-36

Spiritual Waiting*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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It's amazing – you can get an app for just about anything nowadays. You can recite the daily office, buy a book, have a meal delivered, or even find a date – all with a push of a button. I recently read that there are something like 4 million apps that can be downloaded for our phones and tablets!

One of the more unusual apps that I have on my phone is a vacation countdown app. Have any of you heard of such a thing? Basically the app tells me, at a glance, how many days are left until my next vacation. As of today, I have 74 days to go. But who's counting?

Seriously, though, the vacation countdown app has helped me to get through some particularly challenging work days by allowing me to daydream about the future. But there is one significant drawback to such a tool. The app is so focused on the end goal – that is, the start date of my next vacation – that it's easy to lose sight of what might happen between now and then.

In other words, I might be so focused on the future, that I fail to notice all the good things that are happening during the next 73 days – such as the joy of buying travel guides, or sharing travel plans with family and friends. This is what I call the “vacation countdown” mindset: being so focused on the end goal that we've lost sight of our current journey, right here and right now.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. As many of you know, not only is today the beginning of a new liturgical season – as we shift from green to violet – but it's also the beginning of a new liturgical year. “Advent” comes from the Latin word “adventus,” which means “arriving” or “coming.” This, of course, points to the arrival or coming of Christmas at the end of the four Sundays of Advent.

Now I've always loved the season of Advent. It's one of my favorite liturgical seasons. For me, Advent is the church equivalent of when Christmas decorations first start showing up in department store windows, or when carols start playing on your music playlists. There is excitement and anticipation in the air.

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But all too often, Advent can end up being like a vacation countdown app. That is, we can be so focused on December 25th, and the “end goal” of Christmas, that we overlook the Advent journey itself. In other words, Advent becomes mostly a countdown to Christmas – as opposed to a liturgical season in its own right.

To be sure, Advent *is* about waiting. It’s certainly about waiting for Christmas, on which we celebrate the first coming of Jesus Christ some two thousand years ago. But, as today’s lectionary readings remind us, Advent is also about waiting for the second coming of Christ – which has yet to happen.

In today’s gospel reading from Luke, Jesus tells us that we will one day “see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.” Similarly, in our epistle reading from the First Letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul talks about the “coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” one day. But until these things happen, we are called to wait.

Now waiting often has a bad connotation in our “right now” culture. Technology allows us to text a friend on the other side of the globe in a fraction of a second. Is it any wonder that waiting for more than a few hours – let alone a few days or weeks – often makes us feel helpless and captive to the passage of time? This can be especially true in the secular world.

Interestingly, the spiritual practice of waiting is actually the exact opposite of that. There is nothing passive about spiritual waiting. Spiritual waiting is about paying close attention to what is happening all around us. During this time, we actively reflect upon – and make plans for – what has already been promised to us, which is the full arrival of God’s Kingdom.

And so, our waiting in Advent is never just about sitting around. Rather, we wait in active anticipation of what today’s Hebrew Bible reading from Jeremiah says about the “righteous Branch” that will “spring up” and “execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

I’ve learned a lot about waiting from our dog Chartres. She has a favorite place to sit in our apartment. It’s under a bench located right across from our front door. Whenever Michael is not at home, Chartres sits there and waits for him to return, even if it’s not for several hours.

Sometimes it may look like she’s taking a nap, but she’s actually paying attention the whole time. I can see her ears perk up, or hear her growl softly, whenever she hears the elevator doors opening or footsteps or voices in the hallway on the other side of the door. Chartres is constantly looking for signs of Michael’s return. Nine times out of ten, it’s not him. But when it is him, she’s ready to welcome him home.

In the same way, Jesus invites us in today’s gospel reading to pay close attention to the signs all around us. Jesus tells us that the second coming will be accompanied by “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars.” We are to “raise [our] heads” and to look up. Just as we know that summer is coming when the fig tree starts to sprout its leaves, we will know that God’s reign is coming when we see certain signs of the Kingdom. Jesus teaches us to be on guard “at all times” so that we are not distracted by the “worries of this life” and caught unaware.

What are some signs that we are still waiting for God's Kingdom of justice and righteousness? For some, it might be the heart-wrenching images that we've seen this week of asylum-seeking women and children being sprayed with tear gas. For others, it might be the continuing epidemic of gun violence and mass shootings in our schools, houses of worship, and other public spaces. For still others, it might be the rapid – and possibly irreversible – disintegration of our fragile ecosystem. Jesus' teaching in today's gospel that there will be "distress among nations" is not so farfetched after all.

But what might be some signs of hope that God's Kingdom is, in fact, breaking through? For some, it might be the upcoming visit by Bishop Larry Provenzano of the Diocese of Long Island, to provide pastoral care to migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. For others, it might be the national efforts by Episcopal leaders, including our own Bishops Dietsche and Shin, to organize against gun violence. For still others, it might be the robust debate happening in the Diocese of New York over the impact of fossil fuels on the environment.

The point of Advent is this: God's Kingdom of justice and righteousness is not yet fully here. That's the reason for the Second Coming. The Second Coming is not just some scary apocalyptic horror show. Rather, it's an acknowledgment that we need God's help to get us out of the mess that we've gotten ourselves into as human beings. We can't do it alone. But until that time comes, we are called to actively wait.

So how might we actively wait this Advent season? Let me close by suggesting a few online resources that are not vacation countdown apps. There are actually a number of helpful resources that can enrich your spiritual journey during the next 23 days.

One of these is an app by Forward Movement, the same Episcopal organization that publishes the small booklets of daily reflections that are available at the back of the church. They also publish the pamphlets that are on the rack in the Holy Family Chapel. Father Platt has been busy organizing them for the last few weeks. Anyway, Forward Movement has an app called "Journey Through Advent 2018" that provides scripture readings, a meditation, a journal entry, and even a cartoon that you can color, for each of the 23 days of the Advent season. It's like a digital Advent calendar, but with a special focus on daily spiritual practices.

There's also a daily Advent email distributed by the brothers of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I used to go there for spiritual direction a number of years ago. The resource is called AdventWord, and it presents one word for each day of the Advent season. Today's word, for example, is "journey." People all around the world will post images and reflections on each day's word. You can sign up for this resource by going to AdventWord.org or by searching #AdventWord.

Jesus invites us to engage in active waiting during this Advent season. He invites us to look closely for signs of the coming of God's Kingdom. We must be "alert at all times." May the coming weeks of Advent be, for each of you, more than just a simple countdown to Christmas. May your Advent be a journey of active waiting – and preparation – for the full arrival of God's reign of justice and righteousness.