

St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish in Newark
Newark, DE
First Sunday in Advent – November 27, 2016/Year A
Isaiah 2:1-15 Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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May my words reveal the greater glory of God.

AMEN

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“**What are you waiting for?**” I stood on the bank of the creek that ran behind our family farm, some fifteen feet above the meandering water below. The rope in my hands held tightly, I had watched two other friends swing wide off the ground and over the creek, let go of the rope with a large splash in the water below, and then surface again with laughter. The **surface again part** was the most important for me at that point.

“**What are you waiting for?**” Buddy was a neighborhood friend, a little older and a lot bigger than me in physical stature. He was a good friend, although at times could be pretty mean and a bully too. He continued chiding me while the others began to echo his taunts – “**Are you chicken? You are a skinny stinky chicken, that’s all you are!**” I grasped the rope tighter, took a few steps backward, closed my eyes, and then ... **waited a little bit longer!**

Advent is much like this moment in time from my childhood. I hold on to the rope of life tightly, feeling the push and pull of world demands on our time, in this season of the year. I **should** swing into action. I **should** be doing SOMETHING, ANYTHING to move whatever needs moved forward, if even I can. So, I take a few steps backward, grasp the rope of life demands tighter, and then ... **I wait, with God.**

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Advent is a dark time, physically with the light of the sun bending away from our portion of earth, and, for some, psychologically and spiritually as well. For our faith and life journey, living into Advent’s dark time can make the light of Christmas shine brighter. It is not a penitential season, we will leave that for Lent. Advent is a **season of preparation, a waiting in the shadow times, a take-a-look-at-yourself time.** It is time for Mary’s Magnificat to sing with humble gratefulness of the richest presence we can ever receive. It is time when John the “Baddest” Baptist comes round in his funny clothes and odd dietary practices, his voice hoarse from bellowing to try and **stir us up again.**

Winter comes and draws up the seasonal darkness around us. We wait, hoping for just one more hour of light to afford us the time to do something, anything. An extra hour to be busier, to work longer, maybe to feel safer. This darkness invades the mind and soul of some, causing us to FEEL dark, empty, and void of energy on the one hand, while being taunted by tension and anxiety on the other.

Yet we know darkness is the cycle of nature and the cycle of life. Nature needs the dark of winter to hibernate and prepare for spring's renewal and growth. Perhaps we could embrace this time to experience a quiet and peace within that waiting in contemplation and preparation can bring. The darkness and cold that winter brings invites us to draw closer to one another for warmth and companionship along this journey of life.

Still, we do our best to avoid this dark time of year. We flood the natural darkness with artificial light of ridiculously early Christmas decorations, trying their best to banish the dark with their garish lights and loud persistent noise of consuming. I swear the Hallmark Channel started showing Christmas movies in July – not that I watch that often! The lights are everywhere, and draw us into spending more that we have to spend, forcing our need to dash from store to store wrapped in the heavy cloak of tension and anxiety – **did I buy enough ... did I buy the right things to make everyone happy ... I have no time for patience ... I have no time for prayer ... I have no time ...**

In his book **Seasons of Hope**, Henri Nouwen offers a vision of how we might **wait with an attitude** in the gift that Advent offers ...

“Waiting with a *sense of promise*. People like Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah, like shepherds and wise ones, wait to receive a promise. They have received something that is at work in them, a seed of God's promise and presence, and it is always a movement from SOMETHING to SOMETHING MORE. Therefore, waiting is *active*, being fully present to the moment in the conviction that something is happening where you are, right here and now.

So a waiting person is *patient* ... to stay where we are and live into our fullest presence that the situation of life brings. Patient living is to live actively in the present ... in the open-ended place of hope. Waiting this way is an enormously radical attitude toward a life that demands only DOING alone holds meaning.

So how are we to wait as a people of God? We wait *together* in a community that supports, celebrates, sorrows, confesses, forgives, seeks forgiveness, and affirms [the dignity] of one another, so we see what we wait for has already begun to take place in our lives, and invites us to share ourselves to the world.”

Perhaps if we **wait with an attitude** for the True Light of the world, the embodiment of peace, joy, and love, we could settle our soul for a time and rest in the darkness. We might allow the quiet to still and surround us, the darkness of winter's rest, to shield us in a time of prayer, taking stock, and regaining our inner peace that passes all understanding. Perhaps waiting in this attitude could prepare us more fully for *“the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

After the September 11 attacks, our country introduced the Homeland Security Advisory System. This was best known for its **color-coded threat scale** of five different colors to indicate the possibility of a terrorist attack. Although the system was introduced to make us feel safer, studies have shown that the rising threat level created negative effects that resulted in higher levels of anxiety and fear. The government has since replaced this system with the National Terrorist Advisory System that issues bulletins.

In addition to this system, we have warning systems and emergency plans for events in nature such as tornados, floods, hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes, and on and on. We have traffic advisories, advisories for air quality, and Amber Alert for missing children. In today's gospel, Matthew gives our **Advent Advisory Alert Bulletin** – *“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”* The coming again of the Christ to judge *the quick and the dead*, and only God knows the year, month, week, day, hour, or minute. At least with weather alerts the local radar system shows us where the storm is and when we can expect it to arrive.

Most recent studies reveal that many Americans live with **less than 40% awareness** of what is happening in their immediate surroundings. We are so preoccupied with our electronic devices, so distracted by the plethora of daily concerns, that we miss what is happening before our very eyes, before our very hearts. Then Jesus calls us to *“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”*

The call of Advent is to **live wide awake** so that we can be alert to God's working in us and in our world, to bring about the kingdom of God by being kingdom builders. Each time we **live wide awake**, the Kingdom of God comes nearer.

Come, holy Advent; Cleanse me of all impurities in these darkening days, so that I can truly be ready to celebrate Christmas as the birth of Jesus. Cleanse me of impatience so as to make me calm. Cleanse me of anger so as to make me more loving. Cleanse me of selfishness and blindness to the needs of the world around me so as to make me richer in giving my life to You and for You.

AMEN