

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

December 3, 2023 (1st Sunday in Advent, Year B)
Mark 13:24-37

I once read a description of Advent that said this: “The days of Advent point the people of God toward the three comings of the Lord Jesus. He CAME among us at Bethlehem. He COMES among us NOW in the scriptures, the waters of baptism, the eucharistic meal, and the community of faith. He will come AGAIN in glory to judge the living and the dead. Keep awake, for his coming is certain and his day draws near.”

Our readings today focus on that LAST part. We call it the “second coming” of Christ. It will be the end of all things. “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.” In other words, it will be a cosmic event, and we wait for it with great expectation.

And that’s where we go AGAINST the CURRENT of our CULTURE. The WORLD around us has a lot of ANXIETY about the future. People don’t know what to expect. Anything could happen. But as Christians, we can see BEYOND that. It may be dark NOW, but we’ve HEARD what the SUNRISE will be like. The victory has ALREADY been won. Christ will come again and bring a NEW creation, a new heaven and a new earth. He will FILL ALL things. THAT’S what the future HOLDS. And of that, we, as CHRISTIANS, are CERTAIN.

“But” Jesus says, “ABOUT that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels, nor even the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.” So, since we DON’T KNOW when it will come, UNTIL that day, we wait.

But, oh, how DIFFICULT WAITING IS. One pastor I knew in North Dakota always told stories of what she called “kinderland.” Her 3-year-old loved to wear dresses, no matter what the weather. One day it was particularly cold, and they were going to town. Anya wanted to wear a dress, but her mom told her it was too cold. Anya’s solution was to wear pants under her dress.

So, they were on their way to town, and Anya says, “Mommy, I brought ANOTHER dress, in case it’s SUMMER in Minot. Her mom explained that the weather would be the SAME in town as it was at home, and Anya replied, “Maybe it will be summer TOMORROW.”

Our children tell us all the time: “I can’t wait! I can’t wait for Christmas to come! I can’t wait until we open our presents!”

A child will be the first to tell you that waiting is hard. It’s tough: waiting your turn at the doctor’s office; waiting in line at a busy store; waiting in traffic. Most of us get irritated when we have to wait very LONG. We live in a world of instant gratification. We’ve lost the PATIENCE to wait.

The BIG waits are actually PAINFUL: a lonely person waits for someone to call; a childless couple waits for pregnancy or adoption; a family waits for death to FINALLY TAKE a loved one wracked with pain and cancer.

The hardest waiting of ALL, though, is our wait for God. A cartoonist pictured it this way: a man prays, “God, I know that you see things different from us. I know that a thousand years are like a MINUTE to you, and that a MILLION DOLLARS are like a penny. I was wondering — could you give me one of YOUR PENNIES?”

In the next frame are the booming words from heaven: “SURE! Just a MINUTE!”

Unfortunately, waiting has ceased to be AMUSING for many of us. Scripture tells us that people get TIRED of waiting for God. People lose their FAITH, because it seems as if God’s not around. They pray, and no answer comes. They hope, and finally give UP hoping.

Some years ago, a man named Sean Coxie came to a turning point in his life. His wife left him. His business went bad. Religion left him cold.

He was angry at LIFE. He was upset with the people who had let him down. And he was MOST fed up with HIMSELF for being such a SUCKER.

Sean was at the end of his rope. He felt hopeless and alone. There was only one thing he could think of doing, and that was to take the last \$300 of his savings and fly to Florida to see his aging father. Sean's father had been the ONE solid rock in his life when he was younger. Now he needed to SEE his dad again and try to put his life back together.

That night they stood on a dock watching a glorious sunset over the Gulf of Mexico. The view was magnificent, but Sean's bitterness boiled to the surface. "You know," he said to his dad, "if we could take EVERY GREAT moment like this that we EVER experience in our ENTIRE lives and put them all back to back, they probably wouldn't last TWENTY minutes!"

He expected his dad to object. He was SURE that his dad would tell him to grow up, to quit complaining, to pull himself together.

But his dad was silent for a moment. And then he said, "You're probably right, Son." Then Sean's father looked at him and said, "But they're PRECIOUS minutes, aren't they?!"

With that, Sean felt the anger drain away. In his heart, he once again began to feel the longing, the yearning for God. "I can't wait!" became, for HIM, the call of HOPE.

Living in this world challenges even the HARDIEST person to find a source of HOPE BEYOND THEMSELVES. That's the kind of waiting our readings speak of today. It's the waiting of the farmer who can't see the HARVEST in the SEED, but CLINGS to its PROMISE in his heart. It's the waiting of the vinedresser who can't TASTE the WINE, except in the ANTICIPATION of his heart. It's the waiting of the expectant mother who LONGS to see her baby so DEEPLY that sometimes her heart OVERFLOWS with tears.

That's the astounding promise of Advent — that ABOVE the BLEAK SKIES of human AGGRESSION, and even BEYOND THE DARK HORIZONS OF HUMAN DESPAIR, shines a LIGHT OF ETERNITY that puts them BOTH aside. And every time we see ONE MOMENT of FLEETINGLY BRIEF BEAUTY in this world, our longing is REKINDLED and our HOPE IS NURTURED. And those MOMENTS are PRECIOUS, aren't they?

Amid all the frustrations and darkness of our world, we still wait with HOPE, knowing that the King of kings will someday return. Today we SAY, "I can't wait!" We say it with a FAITH that knows things AREN'T the way they SHOULD be. We say it with a PAIN in our hearts, because we know things AREN'T what they COULD be. We say it with LIVES that have felt the TEARS of shattered expectations and unanswered prayer.

But somehow, the bright spots that leap out at us every now and then are the promise that God's plans are only UNFINISHED; they have NOT been revoked. We cling to our anticipation. We nurture our expectation. We tend to the seeds of HOPE that the gospel has planted in our hearts. And those seeds are PRECIOUS, aren't they?

We may not be able to change our world in all the ways we would LIKE to. But we have seen ENOUGH of God's faithfulness through Christmases PAST to know that God will make things right once AGAIN in our FUTURE.

We LIVE like the psalmist writes: "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning" (Ps. 130:5-6).

And those HOPEFUL MORNINGS are PRECIOUS, aren't they?

I don't know about you, but I can't WAIT for that LAST day... when the Son, (pointing to the cross) of GOD, will rise. Amen.