

Sermon Advent 1 Year B 2017

Isaiah 64:1- 9

Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

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Growing up, I was the oldest of four boys. When I reached twelve years of age, I became the de-facto babysitter. When my parents went out for the evening, I was in charge. As soon as they left, my 3 brothers and I would head to the living room. We would rearrange the furniture by pushing the sofa back, the chairs back to the corners of the room, the coffee table out of the way, end tables and lamps aside. All that remained in the center was the large rug covered floor. This was the wrestling ring. Tag team wrestling would begin. My youngest brother, Chip, and I were a team wrestling against our two middle brothers, Robin and Chris. Professional wrestling may be fake or staged but there was no fakery with our wrestling. We would wrestle until we were exhausted. That is what we did; that was how we related to one another as brothers.

Then as we lay exhausted on the rug, reality struck. Suddenly, we had to prepare for our parent's return. It was time to clean up. We had to carefully put the furniture back in place. We had to return the room to its undisturbed state. Everything had to be ready and woe to us if anything was amiss on their return. Once we weren't as careful as we should have been. A glass vase was broken and the punishment was not pleasant. We were ever vigilant as a result.

That sense of anticipation still stays with me and I am especially aware of it as Advent, the season of preparation, begins. Last Tuesday, folks were here at church getting ready for Advent. The flower guild was putting up the wreaths.

The altar guild was cleaning and preparing to turn everything over to the team responsible for our December services.

On this first Sunday of Advent, we begin a new church year in the three-year lectionary cycle. This year our gospel lessons will come predominantly from the gospel of Mark. In today's lesson, Jesus is calling us to a state of readiness for his second coming.

The season of Advent is filled with a sense of anticipation as Jesus calls us to "Beware, keep alert." Jesus is calling us to live in a state of anticipation and readiness to meet Jesus at the end of our lives or at his second coming. Since we cannot predict with any certainty either date, Jesus encourages us to be alert or perhaps today he might say, "Don't be distracted."

This spiritual readiness is a kind of pins and needles anticipation. Perhaps we should approach this readiness in the way that we prepare for the arrival of guests for dinner this time of year. Is everything in its place, is everything spotless and clean, is the table set, decorations in place, candles lit, and dinner in the oven cooking to be ready on time? We know what that sense of anticipation feels like as we pass through the house one last time looking to see that everything is ready.

Or we might relate it to preparing our gift lists and then searching for bargains to complete the purchases. The ubiquitous Black Friday sales play upon this sense of preparation whether our shopping is done in store or online. Shopping has changed significantly over time.

Seeing the energy and anticipation that people put into their shopping suggests to me a sense of perhaps what God is hoping we will put into our relationship of faith. That kind of intentionality, deliberate planning and effort. What a world this would be if we devoted ourselves to God with the effort that goes into being in just the right position to snatch up a Black Friday doorbuster,

whether we position ourselves outside the big box store or in front of our computer.

And in so many ways, this season seems to require more from us than any other time of year. This goes way beyond gift purchases, as there is food to prepare, decorating, tree trimming, entertaining, family visits, and with end of the year financial planning mixed in as well. So, while we are already trying to accomplish more than usual, Advent calls us to prepare in spiritual spheres as well.

Jesus conveyed that sense of anticipation in the parable of the master and his servants. We do not know the hour so we are called to be ready. What does that involve? I think that it is more than staying alert and at attention. Servants have tasks to perform and they are to keep busy and stay awake until the master returns. Similarly, we have tasks to do as well.

We must begin in the only place that we truly have any control and that is with ourselves.

Prayer is a primary task and point of connection with the divine. Advent is a fertile time and when we find ourselves holding some grudge against another, we can pray for God's help and assistance in being able to let go and facilitate new openings to relationship. We let go rather than nurse our wounds and grudges, no matter how justified we may feel. This letting go allows room for a new spirit of hopefulness and possibility.

There is another kind of vigilance required of us as well. We aren't just standing at the ready; rather when we see another in need today, we respond. We have today to prepare, and just as importantly, we have today to respond as well. Perhaps we are to be constantly increasing our field of vision. When we see someone hungry we can ask how Jesus would have us respond. When we hear of one who is sick, how are we to respond? Are we to prepare a meal, make a visit, send a card, rake their leaves, or support them in some other way? There are any

number of ways to respond in showing our love and concern for our neighbor. As busy as we are, we mustn't put off responding to those in need that we encounter each day. God's hope is that we will respond with a sense of urgency. Alertness without action doesn't count for much.

Advent isn't merely a season to wait but a time to prepare. So, Advent offers many possible activities to expand our vision. At mealtime we might make use of an Advent wreath or advent calendar. This year, VTS has prepared a series for every day of Advent called AdventWord. We sent the information and link out with our Constant Contact message. If you missed that don't worry. We will post the AdventWord each day on our Facebook page. Beginning tomorrow and continuing through Advent, there is a word with a short reflection and an image that accompanies it. You and/or your family might consider this word and image at dinner or bedtime perhaps.

Some find the experience of participating in the Angel Tree to be a powerful one. You might take an angel or bear off our tree in the Fauber Gallery. Then perhaps shop with children or grandchildren for the recipient. This shared time reflecting on the needs of others can transform this season of waiting into a season of preparation.

Last week was our week to ring the bell for the Salvation Army kettle at Kroger. The experience was eye opening for me. It was a delight to participate in this tradition and interact with the people going by. My eyes were opened to what this requires of those who volunteer. I learned a lot in the process. I won't pass these volunteers as easily in the future.

Advent wreaths, angel trees, AdventWord reflections, ringing the bell, these are just some of the ways we might open ourselves to the work that Jesus calls us to.

Now these are busy times and we need one more thing to do like we need a hole in the head as my father would have said, but Advent calls us not just to prepare for the joy and delight that is Christmas, but also to remember that we are preparing for Jesus.

We devote a lot of time and effort for the celebration of Christmas and the exchanging of gifts. Yet ultimately, the gifts that we bought may not produce the fulfillment and satisfaction that we hope. We may have been seduced by the marketing hoping that this would truly be the perfect gift, the one gift that will truly be remembered and treasured.

I don't believe that gift will ever come from a Black Friday sale whether in store or online, no matter how much energy we put into them. The perfect gift has already been given us in the Incarnation of Jesus. The gift of God for the people of God.

This is Jesus whose birth at Christmas revealed the love of God, made visible in human form. The Word made flesh. This love of God surrounds us on every side. The love of God was manifested in Jesus and continues to be present to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. And one day, Jesus will come again. The season of Advent reminds us not just to prepare for Christmas and all the wonder that represents. Christians are remembering and at the same time also preparing for something even greater as we prepare for Christ's second coming. Jesus says, "Beware, be alert." "Keep awake." Don't be distracted.