

The First Sunday in Advent
November 30-December 1, 2019
Matthew 24:36-44

“Get Ready for the Day”

Thanksgiving has come and gone, and I hope you enjoyed a bountiful feast with turkey and all the trimmings. Now we enter the busy month of December, and as we do, we also enter a new church year with the season of Advent. Advent brings with it a new cycle of Scripture readings for worship in the year ahead. For the year ahead, we are in Cycle A of the 3-year lectionary series that will focus on the Gospel of Matthew. The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, meaning “to come to.” This brief 4-week season is often misunderstood and thought to be a time of preparation for Christmas. But that is not the primary purpose of Advent. The primary purpose of Advent is not to help us prepare for Christ’s first coming, which was his birth in Bethlehem some 2000+ years ago, what we celebrate at Christmas. Rather, Advent calls us to be ready for the day of Christ’s second advent when he will come again, no longer as a helpless infant, but clothed in majesty and glory as the King and Judge of all creation. That is especially the theme for this First Sunday in Advent as we hear in the Scripture lessons, prayers, and hymns. The color for this season is a rich, royal blue – a color of hope as we wait and watch for the Savior’s promised return. The theme for Advent preaching is “Get Ready!” and today the message, based on Jesus’ words in the Gospel lesson, is entitled, “Get Ready for the Day.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Today’s theme of “Get Ready for the Day” probably makes us think ahead to the “big day” of December 25, Christmas Day. In the month ahead there is shopping and gift buying, sending cards, decorating, special worship services, parties, concerts, family gatherings. There’s a lot crammed into a short period of time. I often hear people ask, “Are you ready for Christmas?” My standard response goes like this: “The good news about Christmas is that whether we are ready or not, Christmas still comes.” When all is said and done, the blessing of Christmas is not dependent on us and all of our planning and preparation. The blessing of Christmas depends on God, who **“when the fullness of time had come... sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons”** (Galatians 4:4-5). That is what Christmas is all about: the gift of God’s own Son for you and for me; for all people. So what happens if we don’t get all the shopping or decorating done? What happens if we can’t make all of the parties or concerts? Years ago, when I was in college, although I was not a music major, I did take piano and organ lessons, which I really enjoyed. I remember the organ prof as a very quiet, introverted man who was married to a woman who was vivaciously outgoing and a strong extrovert. One year, no matter what they did they could not get their Christmas tree to stand up. It kept falling down time and again. What to do? Rather than get bent out of shape about this annoyance, they decided just to decorate the tree as it was – lying on the floor. Unusual for sure, but it worked and that’s the one Christmas tree everybody remembers. My point here is not to lose sight of what is of first importance. If we can dial down on the stressors of this holiday season as we get ready for Christmas – if we can decorate the Christmas tree lying on the floor – that is a good thing.

We have a pretty good idea of how to get ready for Christmas, but how do we get ready for the day when Jesus will come again? He tells us that **“concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only”** (Matthew 24:36). Jesus really doesn’t cut us much slack here. His words don’t get into the “when,” only that the day is coming: **“Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming... Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect”** (Matthew 24:42, 44). Is it possible to sustain a constant state of readiness without ever knowing when the day will actually come? In essence, that is

what Jesus is calling us to do as we enter into this Advent season. Our friend, Paul the apostle, has some guidance for us in today's Epistle lesson about how we are to live anticipating that day: **“So let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires”** (Romans 13:14). Paul calls on all of us who have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection to let go of things that are not of Christ. Through our Baptism, we have entered into a new existence; a new way of life. The imagery here is of taking off one set of clothes and putting on a new set. The old filthy rags of our fallen human nature have been put off in Baptism, and we have been re-clothed in garments of salvation and covered in Christ's own righteousness (Isaiah 61:10). Because of this, we are to live honorably, not under cover of darkness. If something in our lives cannot stand the light of day, then it is advisable for us not to be engaged in such a thing. By the power of the Holy Spirit poured out upon us in the cleansing waters of Baptism, we are to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:1-4). When we are tempted to revert back to old behaviors that are not of Christ – old ways that are not life-giving – we cry out to Christ who loves us and laid down his life for us, and who promises never to leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). We look for the strength and peace that come to us in God's Word and Sacraments. We seek the encouragement of fellow believers who bless us in our journey of faith. And when we fall – and we all do – we turn in repentance to the Lord, seeking his forgiveness for the sake of Jesus. This is how we get ready for that day.

While we wait for that day, we must still live in this world: earning a living, making our way, caring for our family. We will be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, as Jesus describes in the Gospel lesson. In and of themselves, there's nothing wrong with any of these things. But as children of God, we eat and drink, we marry and are given in marriage while affirming the truth that Jesus can come at any time. We have one foot here in this world, but the other is in eternity. We are called to live in this world in such a way that we may always be ready to leave it at the Lord's calling. That is Advent living as we get ready for the day when Christ will come again.

“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time, now and forever” (Jude 24-25). Amen.