

Sermon for First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2011
“Longing”
Texts: Isaiah 64:1-9; Ps. 80:1-7, 17-19; and Mark 13:24-37
Rev. Rex Piercy

To borrow and mangle a phrase from Charlie Brown of “Peanuts” fame: “I love Advent; it’s Christmas I can’t stand.” Now I hasten to explain myself. It’s not Christmas in the Christian sense which I can’t stand. Christmas with its powerful and wonderful message of “God-with-us,” “Emmanuel,” is the truth we proclaim to the world, the truth of the mystery of Christ’s birth as a holy witness to God’s incarnation. No, the “Christmas” I cannot stand is the one “Black Friday” celebrates, the one I cannot stand is the one the year-round “Christmas” decoration shops promote, the one I cannot stand is the one which wears us out and leaves us the grumpy and surly descendants of Ebenezer Scrooge.

That’s why I love Advent with its deep blues and purples, with its slightly minor key music and its patient waiting, unwilling to rush the season. In fact, the Advent

texts are some of my favorites of the entire year and I relish the opportunity to preach from them.

It’s Advent and the Christmas to which it points that gives us hope of light during the darkest days of winter. But this is no mere celebration of solstice; though it is no accident that early Christians saw in pagan winter rites a metaphor for the message of a God who comes to enlighten everyone. Advent, you see, is not just some “contemplative time” or a time for simplifying or an extended “pre-Christmas” season.

Advent is the church’s time to tell and celebrate a story about how Christ redeems and recreates all of creation. And with the culture bearing down on us to spend mightily and party hearty, even the church sometimes forgets to tell it, if we tell it at all. Perhaps we even feel embarrassed about telling it in December, when we

think or feel we should be focusing on the "babe in the manger."

Of course, even that story isn't **the** point, but is rather one point, of Christmastide. The birth matters, to be sure, but what matters most in Christmastide is not the birth. What matters most is what the Incarnation of God in Jesus begins to unleash in the cosmos, starting here on earth with us.

Thus, in a very real sense, it's not just Advent, the culmination of all things in Christ that we ignore or diminish. We also tend to truncate Christmas, the celebration of the mystery of the Incarnation.

Let's be honest here. For many congregations, Christmas effectively begins and ends in a single Christmas Eve service celebrating the birth and that alone.

And this year may bring an even bigger challenge. Christmas Day will be on a Sunday. The last time this happened, in 2005, a number of very large and prominent

congregations (Willow Creek notably among them) cancelled worship altogether. Many others experienced a "low attendance Sunday," and some even lower than they would normally experience if it were the Sunday after Christmas Day.

We Christians need time to celebrate and contemplate both great truths, the culmination of all things in Jesus and the mystery of the Incarnation of God in Jesus. Advent and Christmas historically have been those times. But both have been deeply compromised in many congregations to the point that neither of these great truths receives anything like the attention each deserves.

So I love Advent. We begin a new church year today with the first Sunday in Advent, the opening of the liturgical year, and the first Sunday in lectionary cycle B of the Christian calendar where Mark's Gospel is prominent. Mark, you remember, doesn't even tell a birth story like Matthew or Luke. But perhaps more than any of the

other Gospels, Mark is an Advent Gospel, with its focus on our need to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ.

I love Advent because it isn't Christmas -- mangers, shepherds and Magi—but because it is about its eternal context, the promised inbreaking of God's reign into the powers of this world and the fulfillment of that promise begun in God's incarnation in Jesus.

This year, our Advent theme is "The Light Is on For You." And that theme is clearly seen in the readings for today. The readings on this First Sunday in Advent call us to a grim, yet hopeful, recognition. The world as we experience it is unsustainable and incompatible with the flourishing of life God desires. It keeps too many of us trapped in oppression and other forms of injustice. No amount of tinkering with it on our part will change this. Its patterns are so ingrained in histories, cultures, technologies, politics, economics and ways of life that only a decisive intervention by

God can restore it to God's intended purposes. We need this world as we know it to end and a truly new world to come in its place.

In Isaiah, the prophet calls for God to appear decisively, to "tear open the heavens" so the nations would tremble. He also confesses the need for such decisive intervention -- the utter sinfulness of humanity, even of those who are part of God's covenant. Finally, he changes metaphors -- from earthly catastrophe to remaking pots, begging God to be merciful when God comes.

The 80th Psalm which is our response to this passage from Isaiah reveals a people who cry out for restoration from the midst of exile. "Restore us, Lord God of hosts," they cry. "Shine the light of your countenance upon us, that we may be saved!"

And in today's Gospel from Mark 13, a section of the gospel

sometimes called the little "apocalypse" because it sounds so much like the Bible's final book, Revelation, Jesus describes the end and instructs his disciples to be on watch for signs of it.

Both of the texts are heavily tinged with apocalyptic images -- cosmic disturbances in the heavens that affect the earth. Both Mark and Isaiah present *urgency*. Mark's urgency is focused around the Second Coming of Christ in the Clouds. Isaiah's is around Israel's desperation and urgency to find an absent God. The Psalm reading conveys a plea for restoration and echoes Isaiah's admission that humankind's sin has angered God.

Too often the days before Christmas are seen as an invitation to a party! But that is not what I hear. I hear texts which are characterized by fear and dread and disaster. Advent is launched with sobering images and ideas. Isaiah pictures a fiery apocalyptic God who rushes in and overwhelms everyone. You might

say that Isaiah was looking for a fear-invoking, bigger than life, present-when-I-need-you God. These Advent days and texts allow us to think about how we experience God as active and present, or as aloof and disinterested.

And then we hear those amazing words of Psalm 80, words the psalmist put into our mouths three times: "Restore us." What would that restoration look like for you, for our world? And finally Mark chimes in to remind us to "be alert" and "keep awake." What does keeping alert mean for us?

I love Advent. Advent serves a dual function, it looks backward to the original Christ-event that we celebrate on Christmas Day, and it looks forward to a second event that we commonly call the Second Coming of Christ. We must not be like those foolish bridesmaids or unwise servants or the goats that did nothing and fall asleep or lost interest while waiting. Christ is indeed coming again! We affirm it

every time we gather around this table: Christ has died, we say, Christ has risen, we affirm, Christ will come again, we pray.

I long for the season of Advent with its air of uncertainty. What are we waiting for, and when will it come? Perhaps the early Christians lived with more of an awareness of this uncertainty that we do; and perhaps we could learn from them. What things might we do differently if we really believed that Christ could return in our lifetime?

Advent reminds us that we have a history with God. This long, long history holds memories of God stepping in and doing something when the need was great. And so we take a moment, we take the time, to remember today, to step into that stream of history and share in that longing of a people enslaved and hoping for freedom, of a captive nation in expectation that the glory of David might lead to a new day.

I love Advent, because it tells us that no matter how bad things are, we belong to God, and that all the earth belongs to God, and we believe that God breaks into this reality regularly. Sometimes, this inbreaking is dramatic and publicly celebrated: I think of the fall of apartheid in South Africa, for example, or the abolition of this state's death penalty. Sometimes it's felt in private consolations and reconciliations, a relationship restored by forgiveness or a return to health. "The coming of Advent jolts the church out of Ordinary Time with the invasive news that it's time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness." (Patricia DeJong) Advent calls us to a time of self-examination as well as hope, and Advent proclaims the radical transformation that God will work which may yet bring us and our world back to wanting to *be* good rather than merely *feel* good.

So it is Advent, and here, on the edge of a new year, around this font and table and in this gathered community of faith, we

see yet another sign of the promise of God's reign in all its fullness, when all of God's children will be joined together in one great heavenly banquet, when every tear will be wiped away, and our joy will be complete. So, let us be alert, and wakeful, and be sure not to miss the signs, or the promise, or the hope we have been given.

Actually it's not just Advent that I love. I don't hate Christmas either. I love Christmas too, the real one, the Christmas of God's coming – in Jesus of Bethlehem and in the Christ of glory.

Originally, Advent was a second penitential season, like Lent. Somehow over the years it has been popularized into a season of celebration. But these texts from Isaiah and Mark call us to something else - to confession and to vigilance. So I close this morning with a prayer of confession for this day, written by a pastor from Virginia, who has captured what this day and this season of longing is all about. Will you pray with me?

Great God of Presence and Promised Coming,

We confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart.

We have failed to fulfill your desire for us to love one another.

We have not followed the paths you have given us,

Choosing instead to follow our own.

We have broken relationships,

We chase consumer desires,

We treat those who wait on us as less than human.

We have rebelled against your love;

We spend our time and money,

on gifts for those who give us gifts.

We have not loved our neighbors, we spend time

With family and friends out of obligation rather than sincere love.

We have not heard the cry of the needy,

The mouth of the poor is still hungry for mercy,

**The cause of the oppressed is
still thirsty for justice.**

**Free us for joyful obedience,
through the Advent of Christ,
Our Lord, Our Messiah, Our
Hope.**

All pray in silence.

Good News! Good News! Good
News!

God so loved the world that he
gave

Sinful and broken humanity a gift:
Emmanuel, God with us.

This proves God's love toward us!

In the name of Jesus Christ, we
are forgiven! Glory to God! Amen!