

This Grand, Awaited Spectacle

By: Stephanie Doeschot

December 1, 2019. What if Christmas didn't come on December 25th, but instead arrived with the first snowfall of the year? Pastor Stephanie's sermon on this first Sunday in Advent is about anticipation. We do not know the day or hour of Christ's Second Coming, so we must be ready at all times.

*** Transcript ***

Grace to you and peace from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Once I chose the theme of anticipation for this week's theme, Carly Simon's lyrics of her song released in 1971 about anticipation kept rolling through my head: "We never know about the days to come / But we think about them anyway / Anticipation " -- although she sings with a lot of flourish -- "Anticipation is makin' me late / is keepin' me waitin'." But then I thought, I simply cannot only use references that are familiar to my generation, so I Googled songs with anticipation themes. Well, Buddy Holly had one in the '50s, and so did the Arctic Monkeys have one in 2002, but they were more precise in anticipating "romantic adventures," so we'll just stick with Carly for right now. Even though she too probably had romance on her mind, at least she captured the waiting part. Anticipating something we long for does keep us waiting, doesn't it?

And waiting is what we do in Advent. We hear the promises. We read the nearly too-good-to-be-believed images in Isaiah all month long, such as people streaming to the mountain of God to learn of God's ways, swords being beat into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, a wolf lying down with a lamb, the wilderness bursting forth in full bloom, the blind having sight restored, and people singing with everlasting joy. Just so you know (a side note) you'll hear more about all of these transformational promises in our Wednesday night Advent worship services, where the readings of Isaiah will be featured each week. But how then can we not anticipate, with deep longing, God's fulfillment of these images?

Lately I've found myself reading, more and more, just headlines for some of the depressing stories in the news around the world. A person can only take so much, right? And then I scan for the hopeful ones -- of the good Samaritans exhibiting acts of kindness. They are out there too, and definitely worth the search. I'm thankful that Advent is here, because it is such a hopeful time. God's promises to be with us, in any and all ways despite disturbing circumstances, cheer our hearts. A theologian once wrote: take your Bible and take your newspaper and read both. But always interpret the newspaper from the Bible. Now, some people can take that to the wrong extent. But the message of hope is clearly there in the Bible.

That is good advice for lots of reasons. As disciples of Christ, it's proper to lament the lamentable, to be spurred on to be agents of peace and reconciliation where there is brokenness -- but always, always, always in the context of being filled with hope and confidence that God is in the business of making all things right in the end. That is our reason for hope.

So let's think about this week's gospel reading. Matthew plunges right into thinking about Jesus' Second Coming or Second Advent. He remembers Jesus' teaching that he was going to be crucified, would rise again and ascend, but that he would come again. According to Matthew, Jesus' words went like this: "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming . . . You must be ready,

for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." I've always thought that the reference to the Son of Man coming like a thief, breaking into a house at night, is somewhat confusing. But really, I think it just shows us how we are to not take every little detail of a parable literally. Instead, it's a pointed image intended to help us grasp the essence of the teaching. Jesus is certainly not saying that he is like a thief, but he is conveying that his Second Coming will be unexpected. He's giving us the reference to remind us that, just as we guard against being unprepared for a thief to come, we don't want to be unprepared for his arrival. His arrival is going to be the best of everything we can imagine, and then some. When he comes again, all that is corrupt and evil will be wiped away, and heaven and earth will be restored to the paradise of Eden. So what's not to anticipate?

A preacher named Jim Somerville got my attention this week in my reading, when he likened waiting for Christ's return to the anticipation children have waiting for Christmas. Their eyes gleam. They look for signs that it's coming soon. They prepare with their families for the big celebration, as gifts are made or purchased and carefully wrapped. Holiday goodies, like cookies and candies, are baked and made. And all kinds of readiness take place in anticipation of something they just know is going to be wonderful. But what I'm really borrowing from Jim here is this statement of his: Imagine a world in which Christmas didn't come on a prescribed date like December 25. Instead, it would arrive with the first snowfall of the year. That got me to thinking. Wouldn't that just change everything? Let's pretend for a few minutes that we would not know when the first snowfall would occur, since weather forecasts (sorry if there are any meteorologists out here) aren't always all that accurate anyway. When the first flakes then appear, it would signal that Christmas was here -- no matter what the date on the calendar says. Our shopping, our cleaning, our baking would be done early. We'd be ready to celebrate at any moment. Our affairs would be in order. The messages of good cheer toward people we sometimes take for granted -- well, we'd just share them everyday because you never know. We'd be mindful of doing what we'd be pleased to be doing when that special moment arrived. We would be ready. Instead of a countdown until Christmas, every morning could be greeted with, "I wonder if today is the day?"

And when each day would come to an end, still waiting for the hope for snowfall, one could still sleep in peace knowing that we'd be one day closer to that day of days and look forward to it, perhaps tomorrow. And then one day, when the sun goes behind the clouds and the skies turn gray, you can just imagine a child glancing out of a classroom window and seeing the first snowflakes appear. Forgetting the protocol of raising his hand, he would surely shout out for all to hear, "Christmas is here!" And everyone in the classroom would hurry over to the windows to see this grand, awaited spectacle. They would barely hear the principal making the announcement that since Christmas has just arrived, they should put their work away right away, because the buses are lining up to take them home ASAP. Everything in town would stop. Every person would drop everything else that was going on, and would immediately join in on the celebration. It would be strange living in a world like that, wouldn't it? It would be so different from the way we currently celebrate Christmas. But you know, it wouldn't be all that different from the unscheduled first Christmas, and it's almost exactly like the unscheduled Second Coming of Christ.

"About that day and hour no one knows," Jesus says, "neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." The first coming of Christ caught his mother in a strange town, miles away from the comforts of home and the help of her local midwife. Yes, she knew he was coming soon. That was obvious. But I wonder if she hoped that maybe she could sneak this little trip in, and still get back home before the baby was actually born. But babies come on their own timetables, and this baby came at the exact time and in the exact circumstances that suited God's timing. Ready or not, God says, I will come when I am ready.

Now, the Second Coming of Christ is even less predictable. And so, says Jesus, we must be ready all the time, with our clothes laid out, with calluses on our knees, and with our accounts made good with other people. Martin Luther reportedly said, when asked what people should be doing to prepare for Christ's return, that we should be planting peach trees. He got it. We don't let up on being about the good work that God has given us to do as we wait with anticipation for God to come and make all things right. But waiting is very hard, and we can get distracted thinking it's probably not going to happen for a very long time, and then we forget to wait intentionally. Our epistle reading today is what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome and surrounding areas, as they were growing somewhat weary of waiting for Christ's return. Paul writes this: "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day."

Let us get our affairs in order. Let us live honorably as in the day. Let us wait with purpose. Let our anticipation guide us in the midst of our circumstances. Can it be possible that being faithful to our Lord in our everyday routines demonstrates holy watchfulness for his return? Is being an honest office manager, a careful school bus driver, an ethical attorney, a thoughtful spouse, and a generous neighbor, really a sign that Jesus is coming back? Yes it is. And if you doubt that, look at the lives of those who do not share an awareness that the Lord is coming soon. Look at the ethical and moral shortcuts that are available, and that many people in our society take all the time. Whether it's something big like the corporate scandals that get revealed every now and then, or something comparatively smaller like the person who steals supplies from the company. Whether it's taking the easy way out by pouring mercury into a river rather than going through the expense of disposing of it properly, or whatever the scenario, people all over the place live like there's no tomorrow, and as though no one who cares is watching them anyway.

The days of Noah are still the context. That's what Jesus brings to mind. And this will remain even the church's context right up until the end. Someone is watching, and someone is returning. As we wait with great anticipation for all the relief and joy that we can experience then, we are employed to live as honorably as we can, waiting with hearts full of hope. Have you seen the bumper sticker that says "Jesus is coming, look busy?" Well, Jesus is coming. Soon. But rather than look busy, the scriptures tell us that he is saying go about your lives doing the honorable things that you'd want to be found doing when he returns -- it matters, it really does -- and wait for him with joy that is deeper than merely just putting a smile on your face. Listen to him now, and find him present in your daily lives, and a wellspring of joy will bubble up from within. Jesus will return at the time of the Father's choosing. Whenever that is, you can anticipate a grand party, because his father knows how to give a really spectacular party.

So you'll want to be ready at all times and join in the prayer of the saints throughout the centuries: Maranatha! Come quickly, Lord Jesus! Please pray with me: Lord God, teach us to wait with patience and intentionality for your coming. We look forward to your full arrival. May you find us ready and eager to celebrate your goodness. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2019, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Stephanie Doeschot, Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44, watchfulness