

Room on the Couch

By: Meagan McLaughlin

November 29, 2020. It is so much more than the birth of a baby that we await in this Advent season. In her sermon today, Pastor Meagan invites us to support each other in our commitment to take seriously the call to keep watch for the presence of God in our midst.

Readings: [Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19](#), [Mark 13:24-37](#)

*** Transcript ***

So thinking about all this waiting, I can still feel the anticipation that filled me as a child when Thanksgiving came, and I knew Christmas was “just around the corner.” When we were expecting company, I would watch from our couch in the living room, because it had a great view of the street and I'd be able to see our guests arriving. I would spend the entire month of December, figuratively speaking, leaning over the back of the couch, trying to make the time go faster! I was desperately curious about every detail of the parties that were being planned — what food would be served, when my cousins would come in from out of town, what service we would attend at church, what Santa would bring me, and could I please, please, please go along when my dad went to pick up my grandmother and my great aunts? Every minute seemed like an hour, hours like days, days like weeks. Christmas was all I could think about, and at the same time it felt like it would never get there. Advent is a time to follow what Jesus calls us to do in Mark — stay awake, keep watch. And I certainly had that down, even if I was more focused on parties and presents than on the birth of Jesus.

Time has changed since then, or perhaps it's my perception that has changed. Now rather than being painfully slow, the month of December flies by so quickly that I hardly have time to realize that it's Advent before suddenly here it is — Christmas Eve. Being who I am, I am always prepared, at least in one sense. Presents are bought and wrapped, the tree is trimmed, food for the family meal is ready. But spiritually and emotionally, I'm always taken by surprise when Christmas comes. I spend more time on my to-do list and less time leaning over the back of the couch. And as the years go by I find myself yearning for the time that I spent as a child simply anticipating.

Our effort to be present and wait during Advent is certainly not helped when we have to walk past several aisles of Christmas decorations in the store in order to get to the Halloween costumes in mid-October, all while listening to “Deck the Halls” and “Frosty the Snowman” piped through the sound system. Everything around us seems to call us to a flurry of activity: buy, bake, order, send, and hurry up because time is running out! And of course, it is important to do the things necessary to get ready to welcome and celebrate with family and friends. But in the midst of all of this activity, on top of the regular daily life that continues, it's easy to forget that Advent is about waiting, and hope, and it's particularly easy to forget what we are waiting and hoping for.

So, what are we waiting for? The obvious answer is that Advent is a season of waiting for Christmas, Jesus' birth. But it is so much more than the birth of a baby that we await. God, in all God's fullness — the God who, as Isaiah described, makes the mountains quake, the God who Mark tells us had the power to make the sun dark and the stars fall, the God of all creation — came to live with us in the messiness of life in the person of Jesus. We remember not just the historical event of Jesus' birth, but the reality of God's presence and work in us and in the world, here and now. Advent is a time to remember that God is with us today, a time to live in hope.

When we look at the world, it can sometimes be really challenging to have hope. All we need to do is turn on the news these days, and we know we live in a broken world. Every decision we make — about work, school, Worship, our social gatherings — is impacted by the pandemic that is raging worse than ever. Like one of the kids said, are we done yet? Are we done? Most of us are planning Christmas celebrations that will look quite different from what we're used to, and we already grieve that loss.

We listen, and we hear the voices of nurses, doctors, and other staff at our community hospitals, who are stretched to — and far beyond — their limits. We hold in prayer those who are ill and struggling for breath, and family members of people who are ill and those who have died.

Our communities are in pain, as racial injustice, poverty, and violence are on the rise. And we are in the midst of political turmoil that seems to impact so many things, and make many of our relationships more complicated than ever.

And for those who have experienced losses in the last year — those who have lost loved ones or relationships, or who have moved from beloved homes filled with memories, or who are living with the realities of unemployment or illness, Advent and Christmas carry the pain and grief of knowing that this year will not be like the ones before — and perhaps no Christmas will ever be the same.

So today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we take a few minutes to hear those voices, feel that pain, and ask the question of how we can have hope, and see God at work, in the midst of it all.

We can take comfort in the midst of this brokenness, knowing that the pain of this world is not new. In the verses before our passage from Mark, Jesus describes war, betrayal, murder, destruction. And he encourages his followers, promising that nothing is too much for God to overcome. With the psalmist, we can bring the brokenness of our communities, and our own pain and brokenness, to God, and cry out — “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, shine forth. Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

The miracle of the hope that we have in Advent is that we are waiting on a God who has never turned away from our pain. As Christians today, whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, whatever grief we live with in this season, whatever challenges we face, we await the birth of Jesus knowing the rest of the story — Jesus lived, taught, challenged, loved, forgave, healed, called.

And Jesus died — and rose again. Death was not the last word then, and it is not the last word today. Jesus transformed people's lives, and we are invited to put ourselves completely in God's hands, like clay ready to be formed by the potter, willing to be changed, to be made new.

In Advent, we're called to live in hope that God is with us today, to trust that the kingdom of God is at hand. Waiting, anticipating, living in hope don't easily find their way onto our “to-do lists,” but in this moment, for this season, it may be the most important thing for us to do.

We don't know the day or the hour when the kingdom of God will be fully accomplished, but we can keep watch, and if we do, we will see glimpses of it. We can see God at work in the way people love and care for each other, in voices courageously speaking truths that are hard to hear, in the beauty of creation.

And we can call out like a watchperson — Hey, look, there it is, God is here, did you see it? — so those around us will also know that we have great reason for hope. We are called to witness to God's

presence by being the hands and feet of God in the world ourselves, by showing God's love and care for others and calling for justice when it is due, so that others can see God at work through us. And most of all, we can put our trust in God, who sends Jesus to show us that no matter what is happening in our lives and in the world, we are never alone.

I plan to spend a lot of time leaning over the back of the couch this Advent, anticipating God's coming into the world anew, trusting in hope in God's faithful promise. I invite you to join me, so we can support each other in our commitment to take seriously the call to keep watch for the presence of God in our midst. We don't know the day or the hour, but there is plenty of room on the couch, and it has a great view.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

2020, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, YouTube, video, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, Mark 13:24-37