

# An Invitation to Watchfulness

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**Third Presbyterian Church**

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**Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37**

By the time I came to Third Church some 13+ years ago, you all were already having the discussion of the sign, or lack of sign, out front on East Avenue. When I first visited here there was a traditional sign on the East Avenue lawn. It was lovely. Its problem was that it might have been adequate for the horse-and-buggy era of East Avenue. But walking by, on the sidewalk, and certainly driving by, left no opportunity to read anything, the name of the church least of all.

So a generous gift by Joan Fisher allowed us to have the sign out front, and widen the entry-way, and provide entry pillars at several places, integrating our entire complex – chapel, and sanctuary, and parish house. Now people know who we are, and when we worship.

I remember in the planning stage when we faced two questions. One, do we want the minister's name on the sign. False modesty and misplaced humility got the better of me and I said "no. The second question was whether we wanted to be able to have changing messages on the sign, lettering of some sort. My original idea was large, six-foot neon letters, but the preservation board had other ideas. Smaller letters, which we would change by hand, was the option. We eventually said no to that as well. While we lost the opportunity to say clever things like "Don't make me come down there" or "You have one new friend request from Jesus. Confirm/Ignore" or "Free Coffee, Everlasting Life: Yes, Membership has Its Privileges," we seized the opportunity for architectural beauty *and* presenting our church's name and worship times elegantly and effectively.

I thought about all that this week as we drove past a church in another city, whose name will go unmentioned. "It's not Christmas, it's Advent," the sign said. I felt like I was being yelled at by that sign. "It's not Christmas, it's Advent." I get the point, and I will speak to the point in a moment. But if a sign is to entice you, that sign might have enticed me to keep right on going, if not to a Starbucks, then at least to another church, if I was church-shopping at all.

Nevertheless, it is Advent, and not Christmas. They are different, at least in the life of the church. But they are not unrelated. One leads to another. One is a season of preparation, of anticipation, of expectation that transitions into, flows into, the next. We will observe Advent around here, and rightly so. We will light the Advent candles and sing the Advent hymns in their minor keys and wear purple both as sign of royalty and solemnity. We will read passages from the prophets and John the Baptist and pay attention to the interplay of first coming and second coming. We will treat the next four weeks as a season of preparation.

But along with the tone of that church sign that I saw this past week, I would want to have a discussion about its content. We *are* preparing for Christmas. We *are* anticipating the birth of the Christ child. We *are* expecting love incarnate to be born and to dwell among us.

***The real issue for me is not getting to Christmas too soon. The real issue for me is getting to Christmas and missing the point.***

We are not in a battle with culture. We are in a conversation with it. And we also need to remember that in our tradition, in our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, we are not opposed to culture, nor set apart from it. But we set within it, amidst it. Not to be of it, but with it.

Several weeks ago in our Thursday Voices discussion we remembered Richard Niebuhr's typology of "Christ Transforming Culture." We might state that differently now, a little less triumphantly, but the point is the same. We are called *into* the world, not away from it or apart from it, to make a difference in it, to bring our values and principles to bear in a world hungry for something different, new, healing. And Advent is our way to get to that moment, to prepare ourselves to engage the world in what this fuss is really all about.

The prophet Isaiah begs God to come down now. Come down now, God. Make the mountains shake. Make your enemies tremble. Chasten us. Correct us. Cleanse us. The prophet realizes that we are not getting this right and that we deserve God's judgment.

But notice the transition. Gloom and doom become hopeful possibility. "We sinned and you were angry" becomes "we are clay, ready to be shaped and formed."

Walter Brueggemann writes that this "prayer exhibits two main features of genuine Advent hope: on the one hand a deep sense of desperation about a situation out of control...(and) on the other hand, a bold and confident trust in God is voiced...Life with God can be completely transformed. That is the urgent hope..." Brueggemann writes that "The prayer of God's coming, which began in bombast, ends on a note of needful, pathos-filled intimacy. In the end, Advent focuses not on God's massive power, but on God's ... sense of solidarity." (*Texts for Preaching, Year B, pages 2-4*)

Christ transforming culture, not condemning it, but also not accepting it as it is. Advent leads to Christmas, a season of preparation leads to a moment of transformation.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is well into his adult ministry. He is talking about a future time, a time of gloom and suffering. Jesus is here, now, but he will go away in order to come back. His earliest followers did not fully grasp this; nor do we do much better. But we do understand his ultimate point. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come...keep awake...Keep awake."

We don't know what to do with this apocalyptic language. Beverly Gaventa writes that "the return of the Son of Man and the crises associated with that return are not events subject to human control or prediction. Disciples must be constantly on the alert for that return, or they will be caught unprepared....watchfulness," Gaventa writes, "is necessary because only God knows what time it really

is...Advent is a season of watching and waiting. Watchfulness is necessary...because only God knows what time it is." She concludes: "As the people of God wait even now, they can anticipate only that the times are in God's hands and not their own. They know that God will not leave them alone, that God will not leave them without hope." (Pages 8-10)

I said that the real issue for me is not getting to Christmas too soon, but in getting to Christmas and missing the point. I believe that. But I also believe that we who are carriers of this story, who are interacting with the culture to make a difference, do need the time and space to prepare as faithfully as we can. That is what Advent is about.

Waiting, Anticipating. Preparing. Expecting. Make those words your Advent prayer. Consider your own heart or soul as a garden that needs its soil cultivated and nurtured in order to best receive what is planted, this good news, this tidings of comfort and joy. Watchfulness.

Monday evening we sat in front of the TV watching and waiting for the news to be delivered from Ferguson, Missouri. I am not sure what I was expecting. What I must admit now that as a white, privileged male, my comprehension of all that is going on, from the legal response, to the community response, is beyond my ability to grasp fully. I do believe that we are called to be awake and alert. I do believe that there is a connection between Ferguson, Missouri, and Rochester, New York and conversations about race and equity and the very real and pressing themes of Advent.

Isaiah and Jesus call us to watch for the signs of the times, and here is one sign, clearly presenting itself, about how we will live together in community, and about how all of God's beloved children will know justice. How can we talk about hope, peace, joy, love and not talk about this cultural moment? How can our preparations for the birth of the Christ child not include the brokenness of the world into which he will be born?

- O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. We will sing that, and we will ask from what do we need to be ransomed.
- Let all mortal flesh keep silence. We will sing that, and we will ask what we need to hear in that profound silence.
- Come, thou long-expected Jesus. We will sing that, and we will ask "come for what," and "into what."

Advent is a four-week season, but it is also a posture of living, a never-ending rhythm of watchfulness and preparedness, of getting ready for God to come into the world. Just as Christmas is a never-ending rhythm of birth and new life, so Advent continually prepares us for good news by inviting us to keep awake, keep alert, so that we can be ready to challenge what needs challenging, and be ready to welcome what needs welcoming. That is why we need Advent – your heart needs it and mine; the church needs it; and the world needs it, whether it knows it or not. It's not Christmas, it's Advent. But Christmas is coming. Be awake. Amen.