

After six very powerful and destructive hurricanes had slammed and stomped through our little community along the NC coast, we knew something about preparing to go through a storm. On the barrier island most folks learned to keep a box by the door packed with important papers, photos and other necessities ready to grab and go when there was a major storm evacuation. Living on the mainland just up from Chadwick Bay, Kathy and I always kept extra water, food and other emergency items on hand so that when a storm approached we were prepared and ready. In some ways, the season of Advent, our journey toward Christmas can feel like preparing for an approaching storm or hurricane. For many, Advent is a driven season of frantic getting ready, a stressful and weary time of endless preparation & frustration as they strive for the perfect and ideal Christmas holiday.

But Advent is really a call to examine and reconsider our lives. Against this world's corrupt and deranged Christmas-script, Advent is our time to pause & reflect, to more carefully attend to the feeding, deepening, nurturing and growth of our souls.

On this, the first Sunday of Advent, our focus is on hope: God's active grace past, present & future, the promise & truth that Jesus has come, is present now, and will come again. Scholars believe that the Matthew passage we read was written several decades after Jesus had ascended to the Father. We know that the early Christians and even the Apostle Paul expected Jesus to return within their mortal lifetimes, and when he hadn't, some were discouraged and doubtful. Matthew begins this section by reminding them that Jesus never said how long they would wait for his return, as we read earlier,

Mathew 24:36

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

The point of these verses was to strengthen and encourage them and to reassure them that indeed Jesus is coming back, by reminding them of four parables Jesus told about his return. First parable: just as Noah's neighbors were surprised amid the ordinary stuff and events of their lives when the drowning rains and flooding did finally arrive, so too, when Jesus returns at the end, it will be sudden and unexpected. The point is to prepare by always being ready, and not be so caught up in stuff and desires of this world that we are not ready for it, when the end finally arrives. In the next verses, a pair of parables, Jesus describes, two men out working in the field, and two women are grinding meal. Jesus explains, one of the two is prepared and ready, while the other, is perhaps so caught up in the details of life, they are unwilling to leave their work & plans to follow Jesus. Jesus is not saying that there is anything wrong with living out our normal and ordinary activities of life, but just don't become so enmeshed in this world's things that we miss out on the coming and the call of Christ.

In the final parable, Jesus gives the same warning to his listeners once again, i.e. don't even try to calculate or anticipate when or how the Lord will come to us, we cannot know, any more than a homeowner knows or is warned in advance, when a thief is going to come and break into their home. Our hope is the assurance that surely Jesus will indeed come again. which leads to the second part of the message,

Mathew 24:42, 44

Keep awake therefore, 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 unexpected hour.

So instead of trying to figure it out or feeling fearful or anxious, concentrate on God's will for our walk and work in this world, by being faithful in whatever situation we have been placed. Don't be overwhelmed by this world or by our present situation, or allow our fear or culture to define how we live and respond, but focus instead on hope and on what God has promised by looking for and noticing what God is accomplishing. The point of the Isaiah passage is a similar message. It was written soon after the Assyrian Empire had conquered and actually obliterated the northern kingdom of Israel. So the southern kingdom of Judah was feeling pretty vulnerable, fearful and anxious. It was a very scary and uncertain time for the nation. This Isaiah text was intended as a word of hope and encouragement, not to panic into making rash or fear-driven decisions, but to remember, and to rely on God's promises. Historically, we know that the Assyrians never did attack them. Isaiah's message is this: don't get frantic or get so caught up in the world of trouble and the stuff you see surrounding you that you

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forget about God's promises to stand with you. Both of these Advent Scripture passages offer a more hopeful vision that reminds us that God's promises and God's presence are with us, that the Light of the Lord is real and it cannot be snuffed out.

In the past, when I preached on these two passages, my focus has been to warn against our preoccupation with the glitter of this world and trying to gratify our every outward seasonal desire toward an absolutely ideal and picture perfect Christmas. It's mostly been about what we can do or what we should do.

But I realize today that Advent is about something much deeper, and the baptisms today were helpful in clarifying my thinking. When I met with the families about baptizing their children, I explained that baptism is not about "fire insurance", and that nothing we can do is going to change the fact that God already loves Jennifer, Arianna and Noah. God already loved them long before he ever even gave them life. And their baptisms today didn't remove or scrub-away any sin, but are a sign of what God accomplished through Jesus Christ long ago. Christian baptism is a sign and seal by which the Church confirms what God has already done, essentially we're saying, "amen, and thank you Lord", and that together, we will respond to Christ present in our lives, so that may we all grow in grace, faithfulness and strength. Whether a person is making their own profession of faith, or parents of faith making a profession on behalf of their child, it is a sign & seal of embracing our hope in God's promises, in the righteousness, grace and mercy of God, and not in our own good works or righteousness. Like baptism, Advent preparations for Christmas are less about what we do or say, then our reliance on receiving God's grace. A meaningful and blessed Christmas is not something we do, but comes as a gift of God's grace that we can receive.

The point is, that Advent is not about us getting Christmas right, but it is a most appropriate time and opportunity, to take stock of our lives, our relationships and our values, and amid the consumerism, to ask where have I compromised? What is it that is interfering – weakening – distracting me from having a more meaningful and blessed Christmas one that does truly focus on the coming of Jesus Christ, and where am I too busy and frantic to receive God's blessings?

So today, as we begin our Advent journey, our texts remind us that it's all too easy for us to miss that main point: to be overly focused & fussing about all the outward things, preoccupied with the glitter and gratifying every desire... or so driven that we miss the most important message of Christmas, that God loves us, and God came to us as a vulnerable baby... and if we are attentive, if we look and listen with our hearts, then we will recognize places where God and God's grace, are visibly at work, if we're not too distracted to notice. To be very practical, sometime during this Advent season, I believe God is going to speak and reach out to each of us with grace anew. And at some point along our Advent and Christmas journey God will speak and embrace us in a unique and meaningful way, so that we can receive God's gracious love anew and afresh as it overflows into our hidden poverty and true need. There will be a clear and definite "God-moment" along the way that will make a difference, and bless our journey of faith, if in hope, we are awake, ready and waiting ... which may mean limiting our holiday preparations & celebrations or by our choosing to refocus on things which are meaningful, and that embrace the Lord's call to grace and hope in God's promises.

My fellow Advent-travelers, if we want a truly wonderful Christmas it begins with an open, thankful and receptive heart, ready and attentive to the grace and blessings of a moment with God powerfully present expanding our hope in God's truth & promises... and may we all be ready and open, able to receive.