



Happy New Church Year!



A Sermon By
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The First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2015

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon is available at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2015-11-29-AAA.mp3>.

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Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-9
Luke 21:25-36

Happy New Year! Or rather... Happy New *Church* Year! The season of Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. Our calendar year begins anew on January 1st. Our church year begins anew today, four weeks before Christmas Day on the first Sunday of Advent.

Our year is made up of four seasons – summer, fall, winter, and spring – and holidays – Independence Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, etc. The same is true for our church year except the liturgical seasons don't revolve around changes in weather, temperature, or national holidays. Church seasons and holy days revolve around the life of Christ and events in the Christian community. There are six church seasons – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. And there are numerous church holidays or holy days including Christmas Day, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday, and so on.

But Advent is the season where it all begins. This is the beginning of the new church year! The word “advent” comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means, “coming.” Advent’s focus is to help Christians prepare our hearts, minds, and souls for the coming of Christ and the adventure of participating in his life and ministry. As we eagerly prepare to receive the Christ child in our midst by remembering and celebrating his lowly birth we also await Jesus’ second coming into the world as triumphant King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

I absolutely love Advent! I love the change in the color of our altar frontals from green to blue. I love the reappearance of the Advent wreath, with its four candles lighted successively each week as the light of Christmas grows stronger and nearer. I get chills when I hear the hauntingly mesmerizing notes of the great Advent anthem “O Come O Come Emmanuel” pouring from the organ. My heart thrills as we sing its chorus and rejoice in the anticipation of Emmanuel, “God with us.” For God is with us my brothers and sisters in this season and always.

In Advent, we are especially invited to remember and to live into the truth of God with us in all things. For though this is a season to prepare our hearts for Christ’s presence, we also must remember that God isn’t present only in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God is present in all the events and encounters of our daily lives. Advent is a perfect time to pause and take in this fact. The French Jesuit priest and scholar Pierre Teilhard de Chardin prays, “Lord, grant that I may see, that I may see you, that I may see and feel your presence in all things and animating all things.” This prayer is a reminder that God is present in all things and animates all things. We simply need to be open to the Divine presence around us. This is a different way of looking at life. It requires reflection and intentionality. It requires us to slow down and pay attention.

Jesus reminds us of the importance of paying attention in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. "Be on your guard," our Lord advises us. Stand up and raise your heads, be on guard, be alert. Mindfulness is Jesus' counsel to us in today's gospel reading. Pay attention to the details – to the signs about you. I encourage you this Advent season to adhere to Jesus' advice. Look around you. Be alert. Pay attention. Be open to God's presence in and around you.

As the calendar year winds down, the days grow shorter and cold weather begins to set in. The trees are just about bare. Soon the earth will harden and freeze. Scampering critters flee to their winter dens. We are surrounded by stark landscapes, icy winds, and darkness. Creation slows down and enters a time of rest. We too are invited to enter a time of rest and reflection to prepare for hearts to recognize our Incarnate God.

Advent is a season of intentional preparation and active waiting for this Incarnate God. We tend to be pretty good at living into that first descriptor – preparation. We know how to prepare for things. We're taught and trained how to actively engage in preparation at an early age. First we make a plan. We list out how we hope to achieve the plan. Then, we implement our plan. We have resources to help us prepare – lists, apps, people. We are a society that knows how to prepare. But waiting on the other hand... Waiting tends to present a greater challenge for most of us. I think our understanding of waiting has a lot to do with it. Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. But the act of waiting doesn't have to be passive. Waiting can be just as active as preparation is. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is the moment. St. Francis of Assisi said, "the journey is essential to the dream." Advent is a journey of waiting and preparation. It is an active and engaged journey to find and be found anew by God.

In the bustle of our daily lives, with all of the distractions and struggles that come our way it is easy for us to lose sight of the transforming love of God that is all around us and that is revealed most fully in Jesus. Advent invites us to remember, re-encounter and re-center ourselves on the heart of our faith: God breaking into history to transform it, and us, historically in the person of Jesus and daily in our lives here and now. May this Advent afford you the opportunity to delve deeper in relationship with God, who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.