

“The house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised his baton. In the silence of a midwinter dusk there is far off in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold your breath to listen...The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.”¹

This poignant selection from Frederick Buechner’s book entitled *Whistling in the Dark* describes the season that begins today. Advent-- described as the hush of the theater, that moment where the mind begins to quiet and the heart gradually calms. That extraordinary moment of stillness begins today and lasts for the next 24 days. But I wonder, does it really last?

Thanksgiving is past and it seems as if Christmas is already here. The front aisles at Sam’s Club have been filled with Christmas decorations since Halloween, the Christmas parties are starting to fill my calendar, and I expect to begin receiving Christmas cards from friends and family any day now.

Today’s Gospel, is about the end times, the time when all will be judged; the time or day of this judgment is unknown to us, unknown to everyone except the Father himself. What is known to us is that some will be taken and some will be left. We also know that when Christ comes again, it will not be announced, and most likely it will not be on December 25th; but, it will happen when all are going about their daily routine.

When my mom was 8 months pregnant with me, her daily routine included taking care of her first 3 children, 3 boys- 14, 12 and 2½. My parents had just sold their house and were in the process of packing, moving and then the unpacking. My mom went to see the doctor for her routine 8-month checkup. During the visit, the doctor said the time has come Mrs. Whitman, you need to stay and have your little girl. My mom’s response: I can’t- I have to find a new nanny for Edward (the 2½ year old), I am taking the other two horseback riding, today just isn’t going to work. Today can’t be the day; I still have a month to go. I’m not ready for the baby. After much discussion, the two agreed that my mom could come back the next day to have the baby. My mom walked out the door, got in the car, and her water broke.

Now let me be clear, this story, while it is about my mother giving birth to me, is by no means supposed to compare myself to baby Jesus, rather it illustrates that the coming of the Lord is not on our schedule, but instead it will be at an unknown time. My birth came at an unknown time for my mom, at a time when there were still preparations to be made. My mom was going about her normal routine, as we all do, and it never crossed her mind that on that hot, mid-July day, her time for preparation would end.

¹ Buechner, Frederick. *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter’s Dictionary*. Harper Collins:2009. (2-3)

And so it is the case with us. As we hear in the Gospel today, no one other than the father, not even the angels nor the Son, know the time when Christ will come again, when judgment for all will occur. But we do know that it will happen in the same way as the flood- people will be carrying on with their daily lives, having business meetings over lunch, grabbing drinks with friends after work, going to the children and grandchildren's basketball games on Saturday. Our culture calls us into this life of busyness, which only becomes worse during this holiday season.

In response to Christ coming at an unknown time, the Gospel tells us that we must keep awake. Not only must we stay awake, but we must be ready and not just ready for Christ but ready to be judged. What does it mean to be ready for the coming of Christ, to be ready for the day of judgment, to be ready to be taken or to be left? (all of which could happen at any moment)

Being watchful doesn't mean to live into a life of fear and anxiety. Rather we should live into a life of expectancy and hope. The kingdom of God is here on earth and Christ will come again. We prepare our hearts and our lives, so that on that day when we are judged, by grace God chooses to take us. Preparation of our lives is not a one-day affair, not even just a goal for Advent; Advent is the beginning, but each day we are called to prepare for the coming of Christ. Each day is a day that we are judged, we confess our sin and we celebrate our thanksgivings. Through God's timeless judgment we are shown his grace every day. We use each day as a chance to turn our hearts to Jesus and let him move in our lives.

This call to a daily awareness of our relationship with God is not easy and quite counter-cultural. The culture we live in often categorizes faith to a Sunday thing, not an everyday thing. The culture we live in already has Christmas trees decorated, gifts under the tree and the frozen turkey waiting in the freezer. We might be ready for Christmas Day, but it doesn't mean that we are ready for the coming of Christ. The two are very different.

Advent, the extraordinary moment before the extraordinary moment of Christ's birth, is that quiet moment just before the show begins. There is a lot of anticipation and even a bit of hope. The quietness begins to permeate me and all those around me. Advent is a reminder to live into that quietness; a reminder to prepare our hearts and lives, not for Christmas morning, but for the judgment that could come at any time.

Today we light the first candle of the Advent wreath. We mark the beginning of Advent and also the beginning of our liturgical year. Our culture tells us that we still have a month until the end of the year. But our church, it tells us the new year is here. While many choose to set New Year's Resolutions on January 1st, I encourage you to be a little counter-cultural today. Celebrate the New Year. Eat a black-eyed pea. Set a resolution today. Resolve to live into the hush of Advent amidst the noise of Christmas come early. Resolve to not be caught unprepared on the day of judgment. Resolve to prepare for the coming of Christ and not just for Christmas Day. Happy New Year!