

Good morning and welcome to all of you who survived the Black Friday sales – as well as those of you who abstained from this annual ritual. Here in the church, we are entering the season not of pre-Christmas, blessed relief, but of Advent.

The word ‘advent’, from the Latin, means ‘coming towards’. We celebrate the Christian reality that something important is coming towards us. This means that while we remember and rejoice in the incarnation of God in Jesus, we are not pointed primarily toward the past. Something new is coming toward us from the future.

That’s the reason why on the first Sunday of Advent we always read Gospel lessons not about the birth of Jesus, but those about his second coming. This often seems strange to those of us in mainline denominations, where there is not a big emphasis on the theological doctrine of Eschatology, that is, teachings about the end of ordinary time and reality.

I doubt that many Episcopalians have read all the Left Behind novels by Tim LeHaye, or been caught up in predictions of an imminent, cataclysmic end of everything. And you will note that Jesus did say, contrary to all those predictions, that no one knows when the end will come, that we cannot know ‘the hour or the day’. So how are we to understand this teaching in our time?

We might begin by thinking of this as presenting the Christian belief that history does not go around and around in endlessly repeated cycles of sameness. Instead, we are headed somewhere. We are destined for salvation – not just of ourselves, but the salvation of all time and all creation. Everything will finally be brought home.

And in the meantime? We are to pay attention and be ready. Jesus talks of those in the days of Noah who were eating and drinking and getting married right up until the flood swept over them. His point is not that eating, drinking and marrying are bad things, but that the clamor of our ordinary lives can easily distract us from the underlying movement of God. In the pressure of our day-to-day calendars, we often miss God’s reality around us that needs our attention NOW.

Lutheran pastor Janet Hunt described a youth retreat in which the leaders had the teenagers give up their cell phones for the weekend, so they could actually be in the retreat. They found that the kids often returned late from breaks – they got caught up in shooting baskets or hanging out.

When they were asked why they hadn't noticed the time, since there were clocks all over the campus, the answer was that they didn't know how to read the clocks. They got the time from those phones that they didn't have. They were cut off from the analogue measure of time, and had only the digital.

Perhaps in a sense this is a metaphor for why we find it hard to "...keep awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." It is as though we live in the digital time of event after event while God is present in the sweeping analogue of eternity. Advent says that eternal time is past, present and future all at once, that we need to be ready in the present, for the future that is coming towards us.

Episcopal priest, Rick Morley, tells of the day things changed for him. He was just lounging in front of the TV, when his wife yelled from upstairs, "Rick..."

"Annoyed that she hadn't waited for a commercial break I answered somewhat grumpily, 'What do you want?'

'My water just broke.'

Moments later she calmly entered the laundry room where I was frantically shoving whites, coloreds and darks indiscriminately into the washer.

'Uh, what are you doing?' she asked.

'I'm doing laundry. I need some things clean before we go off to the hospital to have a baby.'

There was a deafening silence followed by, 'Rick....you don't have time to do laundry. We need to go. Now.'

It was our first child and I was unprepared. Unprepared in terms of clean clothes and in terms of how quickly things become real.”

Our reality, too, is that we are often unprepared for the now. Advent calls us to wake up, to be ready – not because of a terrifying future judgment, but because our lives are so often hollowed out by the unreality of the culture’s demands and values. How will we begin in this season to pay attention to what matters?

We could pay renewed attention to those closest to us, to see what they truly need, how to give and receive love.

We could pay attention to people we meet during the day, to deeply listen and respond in ways that might make our being together holy and life-giving.

Probably much harder, we could attend to those who are not like us at all, whose values and politics seem so far from our own. What could we let them teach us?

We could pay attention to God present around us in the world. Then we might become able to see some light, to receive some peace and joy when we desperately need it.

We could actually pay attention to ourselves. We might let ourselves be awake to our identity as children of God, the reality that we are worth far more than we possess, far more than our job description?

In all these ways we can make ourselves more ready for God’s coming again to us. We do not need to think in terms of bizarre writings that are distortions of The Revelation of John, created by those who profit greatly from books which describe believers being wafted up to heaven,

while everyone else is left behind, to face great tribulation. The true promise of the end is of heaven itself coming down to earth. As Jesus came to us in Bethlehem, so Jesus will come to us here, once more.

And the real message of John's Revelation comes in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... I saw the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,  
'See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his people,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more.'

This is the message of Advent. In the beginning, God. In the end, God. In all our time between, whatever comes, it is God, always God. God with us.