

McCabe United Methodist Church

Anticipating the (Perfect) Gift

Advent & Christmas: “The Perfect Gift”

Sermon on Mark 13:24-37 (11/29 & 11/30/14)

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“The house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in the darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised the 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 silence itself. You hold your breath to listen.

“You walk up the steps to the front door. The empty windows at either side of it tell you nothing, or almost nothing.

“For a second you catch a whiff in the air of some fragrance that reminds you of a place you’ve never been and a time you have no words for. You are aware of your beating heart.

“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.

“The Salvation Army Santa Claus clangs his bell. The sidewalks are so crowded you can hardly move. Exhaust fumes are the chief fragrance in the air, and everybody is [so bundled up against the wind and the chill that they seem too oblivious to really know what all the fuss is about].

“But if you concentrate just for an instant, far off in the deeps of yourself, somewhere you can feel the beating of your heart. For all its madness and lostness – not to mention your own – you can hear *the world itself* holding its breath.”¹

This is a piece that was written by Presbyterian pastor and writer, Frederick Buechner, and I fell in love with it years ago when I first read it. I love the poetry and the sense of deep longing he communicates – especially in these words:

¹ Buechner, Frederick. “Advent” in *Beyond Words*.

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These words and these images are, indeed, filled with poetry and with a deep sense of longing.

But, if I were to choose one word to describe this piece by Frederick Buechner, that word would be anticipation: “*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.*”

Eager hopefulness. Anxious waiting. Looking forward with excitement, perhaps even with some anxiety. *Anticipation.*

It's the way you couldn't sleep a wink on Christmas Eve when you were a kid because you were so excited about opening your presents from Santa the next morning. (Perhaps some of you – young and not-so-young *still* struggle to sleep on Christmas Eve!) *Anticipation.*

It's the way you give thought upon thought over buying *juuust* the right presents for your dear ones...and, of course, it's the way you wait eagerly to see how they will receive the presents you have chosen for them. *Anticipation.*

Last year at this time, the thing I was most eager about during the Advent and Christmas seasons was seeing my family. For some reason, I'd had a particularly lonely fall a year ago and I just could *not* wait to be with those who know and love me best. *Anticipation.*

The word “advent” is from the same word as the word “adventure.” And the church season of Advent *is* a sort of adventure – a journey to a particular

destination...and, in many ways, Advent is a journey that is nearly as important as the destination itself.

During the season of Advent, we are *anticipating* the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives and into our world. And, this Advent anticipation is three-fold: we anticipate the remembrance of that first Christmas, the remembrance of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago...we also anticipate the way Christ comes into our lives daily through the Holy Spirit...and we anticipate Christ's coming again at the end of time, to restore Creation and to usher in the age of eternal justice and peace.

Advent truly is a time of anticipation as we remember Christ's birth, as we seek Christ in the present, and as we look ahead to his return.

Now, clearly, some of us tend to focus on just one or two of these three things. In our culture, there is clear focus on the remembrance of Christ's birth that first Christmas – that's what the gorgeous (though incomplete) Nativity scene in our sanctuary is helping us to do. We are very good at celebrating the remembrance of Christ's birth around this time of year.

We are also pretty good at spending Advent intentionally seeking Christ's presence in our lives *today*. As the hustle and bustle of the holiday season increases every year, Christians are increasingly encouraged to find quiet – to find time to reflect, to be in worship and devotion with family and in church.

So, in mainline Protestant churches like The United Methodist Church, those are the two things we *tend* to anticipate most during the season of Advent: the remembrance of Christ's birth and Christ's coming into our lives daily.

The piece of Advent anticipation we often spend far less time and energy on is that third piece: anticipating Christ's Second Coming when he will usher in the end of time and will bring eternal peace and justice to all of Creation.

I'm not entirely sure why many of us spend so little time thinking about the Second Coming...but, for those of us who don't think about it much, I suspect it's largely because of the Gospel reading we just heard from Mark chapter 13.

Jesus said, "No one knows the day or the time. The angels in heaven don't know, and the Son himself doesn't know. Only the Father knows. So watch out and be ready! You don't know when the time will come. It is like what happens when a man goes away for a while and places his servants in charge

of everything. He tells each of them what to do, and he orders the guard to keep alert. So be alert!”

Especially with all the “end times” hype that can descend upon us when movies like *Left Behind* are released by major motion picture studios, it's hard to simply ignore the idea of Christ's Second Coming. And it's not responsible for us to ignore the idea. But it can seem terrifying...and, for that reason alone, it's nice not to think about it too much!

But, in reality, the best reason *not* to focus too much on the Second Coming of Christ is because of Jesus' own words that no one knows when it's going to happen. Anticipation is fine...in fact, when things seem to spiral out of control in our lives, in our nation, and in our world, we might even *wish* for Jesus' return to happen sooner rather than later!

In fact, I've had friends who, when they are facing some particular trial or are upset about national or global politics, they jokingly pray, “Jesus, come back now!”

Of course, it's only *sort of* a joke...especially in seasons like this one we are currently in – a season where racial tensions have boiled over across the nation, where security seems very fragile, and where so many people are suspicious not only of those in power at all levels, but are also suspicious of those who hold opposing viewpoints.

Rather than *us* doing the very hard work of attempting to listen to and to understand one another, we may simply prefer that Jesus come back to earth in kingly glory to “fix” it all himself. Kind of like the verses from Isaiah chapter 64 that were read during the Advent candle lighting:

“Rip the heavens apart! Come down, Lord; make the mountains tremble. Be a spark that starts a fire, causing water to boil ... Your fearsome deeds have completely amazed us; even the mountains shake when you come down. You are the only God ever seen or heard of who works miracles for his followers.”

Those words were written at a time when the people of ancient Israel were desperately seeking God's presence and needed assurance that everything would eventually be okay. Times of national tumult and political upheaval are nothing new in this world. People in every generation have earnestly prayed for God to miraculously “fix” us.

“Rip the heavens apart! Come down, Lord; make the mountains tremble.” It's as if the prophet Isaiah was saying, “Don't you see everything that's so awful down here? You made all of this – why won't you leave your heavenly seat and heal this earth in the way only you can???”

These words of the prophet are dramatic...they are full of anticipation that is nine-months pregnant and about to experience labor pains: “Rip the heavens apart! Come down, Lord!” Fix us! Heal us! Make everything good and easy and happy!

Very often we do desperately want – even need – God to fix and to heal things in a way nothing earthly can. So, anticipating Christ's Second Coming is a fine thing for Christians to do...but obsessing over it will do no one any earthly good!

I don't know about you, but I'd like to spend my time on earth *doing good*. And, while we're all still here, I'd like to discover how Christ *is* already here on earth, bringing healing...bringing light into darkness, peace into chaos, love into hate. Advent is such a great time for that kind of discovery. It's also a great time to anticipate how we can be *part* of Christ's ongoing work of healing, light, peace, and love.

I have been excited about Advent and Christmas at McCabe since before I even moved here in late June.

As many of you are aware, my mom was born and raised in Bismarck. Her family was actively involved here at McCabe until they moved to Rapid City when my mom started high school. Since I was very young, I've been hearing about how beautiful it is around here this time of year. So, I've been *anticipating* Advent here for a while.

I got even more excited about it in early September when all of our worship-related staff members and other interested folks gathered to actually begin planning for this season. When we gathered, we looked at the Scripture readings we'd be using throughout Advent and Christmas and, as we explored each reading, we brainstormed all sorts of ideas for themes and imagery.

In the midst of the brainstorming, we kept circling around the word “gift” and thinking about how Jesus *is* the true gift of this season – not the gifts on our Christmas wish lists...not the Black Friday door busters...not the candy in the stockings...no. And I think we all know that. I mean, I *know* we know that.

But, around this time every year, we need to be reminded.

Jesus is the gift we are most sincerely anticipating this year. *Jesus* is what happens when God chooses to rip the heavens apart and come down to earth: *Jesus* is hope...*He* is peace...*He* is love...*He* is forgiveness...*He* is our glorious God incarnate, God in-the-flesh.

Jesus is the Perfect Gift: this season and always. May our anticipation be great for his arrival into our hearts, our lives, and our world.

In early November – about a month-and-a-half after our team brainstorming session for Advent and Christmas – our choir accompanist, Nancy Nelson, sent me a link to a YouTube video for a new song called “The Perfect Gift.”

The song is by a Christian recording artist named JJ Heller. Nancy had discovered the song and thought it seemed to fit well with the “gift” theme we'd all loved so much when we were doing our planning brainstorm. When I watched the video, I just kept thinking, “This is *perfect*.” The perfect song for the Perfect Gift.

We'll be singing this song each week of Advent during our 11:15 contemporary worship service...but I wanted you all to experience it, too. The song sounds light and fun, but the message is much bigger. You don't have the words in front of you, but I hope you catch enough of them as the song plays to get the gist.

[Song plays.]

“Fill our hearts with wonder / turn our winter into summer / Fill our lungs with laughter, peace, and joy ...

“He was the Perfect Gift / He came to bring us peace / Holy Child, our King.”

Jesus Christ was and is, indeed, the Perfect Gift. May receiving and sharing *that* gift be what we anticipate most this season. Amen.