

'Tis the Season of Expectation
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November 26, 2016

Our text this week for beginning the season of Advent is Romans 13:11-14
It reads:

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far-gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

NRSV

It has been much easier for me to wake up from my sleep this week because, just down the hall from Tami's and my bedroom, sleep our two little granddaughters. For the last couple of days, we have had the privilege of letting their Mommy and Daddy sleep in while we take the girls and enjoy the morning with them.

The sun comes up, and I have this exhilaration – my granddaughters are here!

Prayer.

Do you remember the feeling of truly being anxious and excited all at the same time? It's that moment in time where eager anticipation meets up with hopeful expectations, and the combination is almost emotionally overwhelming. Maybe it's the morning of Christmas for a 6-year-old, the opening note of "Pomp and Circumstance" for a Graduate, or that magical moment when a newlywed couple makes their way through the applause after the ceremony on their wedding day.

The anxious excitement of all that the future holds.

The text we read at the start suggests just that, the excitement of Christ's return. We talk about it this time of year because it parallels the first coming of a Babe in a manger with the second anticipation of a coming King.

I don't know if any of you realized it when it happened, but just a couple of weeks ago now the Cubs won the World Series. However, it was more than just an exciting World Series. Yes, I know I'm going to use a sports analogy, but bear with me. The 2016 World Series went all seven games, and then on the last game of the series, it came down to extra innings and ended with the Cubs winning 8-7.

So yes, it was exciting and filled with enough drama to make a Hollywood movie. However, for those of you who are baseball enthusiasts, and especially for those of

you who are Chicago Cubs fans, you realize that this is more than just a good year capped off by an amazing series. All through your lives and, for most of you, your parents' and their parents' lives, the Cubs have never won a championship. As a matter of fact, up until this year, the Cubs were the poster child for every loser's experience. The fact that they hadn't won a championship in 107 years put them literally in a league of their own. No American professional sports team has ever had to wait this long for a national championship. The current next closest team was their opponents in this year's World Series—the Cleveland Indians, who've been waiting for a mere 68 years.

Fans and followers had been waiting for so long that they were starting to think that there really was something to the superstitions that surrounded their "Lovable Losers." The so-called jinxes of saying "World Series" before it was realty. The "Black Cat Hoax of 1969" and, of course, the famed "Billy Goat Curse." In a way, all of these were becoming logical explanations as to why the championship had eluded them for so long. Even sympathetic mathematicians provided equations stating that, by the simple laws of probability alone, they should have been in the World Series decades ago. But finally, as of this Fall, all of that is now just folklore. The stories and tales of the Loveable Losers, the Cubs who used to be, are now fading quickly as the wait is over.

Kris Bryant, the Cub's 3rd Baseman, was asked in a post-game interview if he was worried about all the superstitions and bad omens that were very much a part of the Cub's losing history and personality. He simply replied, "We're too young to remember any of that. Besides, we're a new team, and that was the old Cubs.

As God's children, I sometimes wonder if we fall into the same despair. We want to be hopeful, we want to be positive, but we've waited so long that we begin to wonder. Are the scoffers and mockers right? Are we naive to believe in a soon return of Christ? Are we foolish to believe in a return at all?

Can we ever get that feeling of anxious anticipation back, or are we just a little to "grown up" for that when it comes to the Advent of Christ?

Last week Andy talked about putting ourselves in an attitude of thankfulness and gratitude. It is a choice that we make. A few weeks back, Tony Campolo shared the verbal picture of Christ on the cross. That was Friday, but Sunday was coming. It is a choice, a choice that we make—maybe to ourselves first, the ones who quite possibly are the hardest to convince.

In 2 Peter 3, Peter writes to those who were also waiting and getting discouraged.

³⁻⁴ First off, you need to know that in the last days, mockers are going to have a heyday. Reducing everything to the level of their puny feelings, they'll mock, "So what's happened to the promise of his Coming? Our

ancestors are dead and buried, and everything's going on just as it has from the first day of creation. Nothing's changed."

He's sharing this because, in his time just like our time, it is natural to become impatient, to want what we want now. Listen as he goes on:

⁸⁻⁹ Don't overlook the obvious here, friends. With God, one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day. God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness.

So, if you're looking at the coming season with a same ole same ole "FEEL," I'd like to challenge you with a new choice. See this new season, this new Advent Season with new eyes.

Remember our text from Romans?

Let's read one part of it one more time:

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far-gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

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In verse 13, Paul mentions, "Let us live honorably – as in the day." What he's saying is that you have a choice. Yes, you can live in the darkness – or you can wake up to what is really happening and choose to live as if the light that God is providing now is the day! He's calling us to choose to live in the day, even though it hasn't happened yet.

Choose. We get to choose. So, who are we going to be as we enter this Advent season? How will we ever find the excitement, the fervor, and as Paul mentions, the urgency of seeing what is before us?

I would like to suggest we go to the First Advent, which of course, is quite timely, right? Since this is the season, I would like us to notice three choices that will hopefully help us to see this season in a new light, while also creating a better pathway to finding that renewed sense of understanding about Christ's return.

1. Choose to see yourself as a new person in Christ.

Maybe a better way of saying this is: Choose to see yourself fully forgiven and fully accepted.

If we look back to the people and choices that surrounded Christ's birth, it might seem to be a simple and serene little area of the world. But let's not forget there were kings, rulers, soldiers and religious leaders all wanting to keep the status quo, and literally they would stop at nothing to keep their power.

So here comes this little baby, this child who would grow up in their midst and not only see their world, but see beyond it. You see, he knew that those kingdoms and those rulers would eventually fall. His role was not to crush them, but to provide a way for all to rise above the petty powers of the world. He did this by showing *us* who *we* really are, that we are not only worthy to be saved, but that we are now heirs to everything that is his. "We are a new creation," he says. Not **will be**, but **ARE!**

2 Corinthians:

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

This choice might be a hard one, because just like those in Christ's time, the religious leaders who would like to keep us uncertain about the forgiveness and acceptance of God seem to be gaining ground.

However, let's not forget that the whole reason Jesus came into this world to begin with was to redeem us back. That was his choice because he loved us. Now our choice is simply to believe and take what he's freely offered: Our New Life.

2. Choose to increase your level of concern for others.

It's interesting to see who all came to celebrate the birth of Christ. The Bible speaks of two very different visitors who came to see Jesus. One group was a small band of shepherds who just happened to be watching sheep on the hills nearby Bethlehem. We never got their names, didn't know how many there were, and nothing is ever said about them later. But no one in the history of the world has ever been given a more glorious initiation to any even than those lowly shepherds who were startled that night by a host of singing angels.

The second group was a bit more prominent and much more prepared. Their invitation came in the form of a star. They had long been studying and searching, focused on finding this promised child no matter how long or

difficult the journey might be. We believe them to be quite well respected, for no one gets an audience with the king that quickly unless they are of royal importance.

So, here's the spectrum as we see it from an earthly perspective: shepherds to royalty – God was intent that we see humanity from his perspective. That from now on, all would be included into his kingdom.

How are we at creating inclusion? I'm not talking about just increasing our friends list on Facebook or Twitter. If you want to be truly inspired by this Advent season, start praying for those who are not in your immediate circle. Start looking for ways to be reengaged with others who have fallen off your radar screen. And most of all, choose to be the one who loves and includes the marginalized and unaccepted in your world.

3. Choose to recognize the real presence of Christ.

This is not a pretend person that you imagine, like a Christmas fable. Nor did Christ come into this world like a super hero bursting onto our planet in ball of fire. No, he came as a baby—born wrinkly, puckered and slimy like all real babies. However, after one moment in his presence, people were changed.

Just look at the shepherds. It says in Luke 2 that as soon as they had seen him they couldn't keep it to themselves. They forgot how others looked at them; they forgot that they were the "Who's Nots" of society. And they became the very first proclaimers of Christ on earth.

Those wise men from the East not only found a boy king, they found their God and chose to follow him even over the king whose command was to come back to him.

The reality of Christ today being with us and in us is the most significant part of the Gospel. It not only changes us daily, but his presence with us creates what Paul calls a "light" that we choose to put on - within us - that allows us to see the day instead of the night.

There's a great story that takes place when Jesus is just eight days old and his parents come to dedicate him at the Temple.

As they make their way through the various procedures expected of them by the laws still followed from the time of Moses, they found themselves waiting in line for the sacrificial offerings. Then it would be the circumcision, and then the dedication to God. Anyway, while they are moving from one seemingly indifferent priest to the next, finally one feeble old priest moves closer, as if he's seen something in this young couple that others hadn't. He is one of the "Old Faithfuls" of the temple, and almost everyone knows him to be a devout and Godly man.

He walks over to Mary and Joseph, holds out his hands, and asks to take the child in his arms. There, in the middle of all the rituals, all the echoing of scripted blessings and all the overwhelming disinterest, this old priest's eyes light up as if he was 20 again. Nothing has changed except actually EVERYTHING has changed, and he sees it. The Messiah has come, and now the world will never be the same. We will never be the same. He knows now that his life can come to an end because he's seen the Hope of mankind.

This child he was holding was God's plan, not just for him, but for all of us. For him it was as much a reality as if he had been in his prime walking the New Earth with God Himself. He says, "Now I can die, for I have seen your salvation."

The Advent season and the stories that surround it not only bring warmth of times past, they also bring hope for our future. As we realize our part during this "in-between" moment—the moment between the two Advents—let's ask ourselves, who are we really in our choices:

Who are we to drop the torch now?

Who are we to think that our impatience is the impatience that matters?

Who are we to say that God isn't here?

Who are we to believe that God's promise is not sure?

We are –people who bring hope

We are –people who wake up to injustice

We are –people who create avenues for God's mercy

We are –people who live out Christ's love to everyone

Let the anticipation of this new Advent season be your "wake-up call." Let's rise knowing the daylight that God brings!



11/26/16

1. What do you remember as your fondest anticipated event or experience, when you could hardly stand to wait another minute?
2. Why does something that holds so much interest in the beginning seem to lose its appeal over time? What does that say about us as humans and how we honor the time we have?
3. Three things were mentioned this week that could help keep us focus on the urgency of Christ's return. Which one seems to be the hardest to apply, and why?
 - a. Choose to see yourself as a new person.
 - b. Choose to increase your level of concern for others.
 - c. Choose to recognize the realness of Christ now.
4. What will you do now to keep yourself hopeful, eager, and steadfast to meet Christ when he comes?



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