

Advent 1 November 24, 2022

St Margaret's Belfast

Deirdre Good

Welcome to Advent -- for the next four Sundays -- the four Sundays of Advent.

So, what does Advent mean to **you**?

- A time of hectic preparation? Excitement?
- A time of loss and pain, if someone you remember, and love, is dying, or has died during this time?
- A time of fear, if you or someone you know is ill?
- A time of anticipating something new? Perhaps a new family member you expect to meet over Christmastide?

Now, all these ideas belong in Advent. And Advent is a time when we are not only preparing for the coming of Christ as a baby born in Bethlehem but also preparing for the second coming of Christ at the end of the world.

Advent looks ahead to Christ's final advent as judge at the end of time. The now, and the not-yet. Our Scripture readings for the whole season point towards Christ's birth, just as they also challenge us with divine decrees using themes of Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell. Our church decorations are simple and spare, and purple (or blue) is the traditional liturgical color. In the northern hemisphere, Advent season falls at the darkest time of the year, and the natural symbols of darkness and light are evident in Advent and Christmas: Look at our Advent Wreath! In medieval times the Third Sunday of Advent was observed as a splash of color in the restrained atmosphere of Advent (*Gaudete* or 'Rose Sunday'), and

the last days of Advent were marked by the sequence of Great ‘O’ Antiphons, which continue to inspire modern Advent hymns and meditations.

Our lessons are chosen for this first Sunday of Advent to help us reflect on aspects of **time**. There seems to be an emphasis in our lessons on themes of **specific times** when we experience a precipitous event:

- 1) We see a **specific time** in our collect “*the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility*”
- 2) We see a **different but specific point of time** in the prophecy of Isaiah: “*The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. **In days to come** the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills.*”
- 3) We see it also in the Psalm:
“*I was glad when they said to me, **
“Let us go to the house of the Lord.”
Now *our feet are standing **
within your gates, O Jerusalem.”
- 4) And the second lesson goes one step further: it makes the theme of specific, that is, present time, into a time of daybreak, or the morning. I use the recent Updated Edition of the New Revised Standard Version here because it calls hearers to account on the basis of **present** knowledge: “Besides this, **you know what time it is**, how it is **already** the moment for you to wake from sleep. **For salvation is nearer to us now** than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”

5) And awaking at the break of day is also part of our reading from Isaiah, but it adds the theme of stirring and opening our eyes to something astonishing that the prophet sees: “Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height and look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One.”

In all our readings we see a profound human longing for a significant, world-altering event to take away “the works of darkness” all around us; not an event that is solely the result of human intention or effort but that irrupts into our lives at **God’s** initiative. That doesn’t mean we have to be **passive**. We can **prepare** for divine intervention, for example, by praying for the peace of Jerusalem, or by putting on the armor of light, as Paul says in Romans, or by seeking wisdom openly in our prayers as the Canticle indicates, or by “keeping awake” as Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel. But if we think of Advent *solely as the season of preparation*, then we risk putting human endeavor at the center of Advent for four whole weeks. **Because in fact the advent or coming of God is out of our control entirely.** It is coming at a time unknown **even** to the Son of Man; **even** when we are watching, and waiting, and hoping; it is coming at a time of **God’s** choice, and it happens because God is already favorably disposed towards us. And, as I said, we don’t have to be passive. **Advent is a time in which we can and must actively seek to place ourselves where God is already at work because we know that the powers of Jesus’ time, and the powers of our present age, will not triumph.** So where is God’s presence evident in our time? Isaiah pictures it: when God’s justice goes out to all nations from Jerusalem, as God hears all grievances and disputes and arbitrates amongst peoples of all nations, and then,

“they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

Does not this imagery speak to our deepest hopes? And yet it seems horribly unrealistic and even downright naive. So how on earth do we get there? Isaiah invites doubters, skeptics, and realists alike: “**Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!**” Hope is invitational: Advent invites us to make our choices, whether they be personal, social, political, or relational **in that light**, the light of the Lord.

Every year at this time, large department stores like Macy's create seasonal advertisements. This year, the one from John Lewis (a UK fixture), probably unbeknownst to itself, demonstrates gently but pointedly how we might use our Advent season.

In the opening scene, we see a late-middle-aged man strapping on a helmet and going forth with a skateboard. He's intent on learning how to skateboard. And of course, he falls off the skateboard regularly. He falls off it on suburban sidewalks, he falls off it on driveways, he falls off it in skateboard parks. He limps home in between practice sessions and we see him applying frozen peas to his bruised knees. We see him in his local library watching instructional skateboarding videos. Meanwhile his wife is on the phone at different moments saying, “We can't wait—we're really excited!” and preparing household things.

In the meantime, our hero is making progress: in one scene he's able to dismount a short run flipping the skateboard up into his hands to carry it home. But he's not perfect; he keeps practicing; even late at night in underground garages, and after dark when skateboard parks are empty. He gets creative: using the skateboard as a wheelbarrow to bring home the Christmas tree.

In the last scene, he's in the kitchen peeling potatoes where both he and his wife are preparing what looks like Christmas dinner. In the middle of their preparations the doorbell rings and at the door is a woman accompanied by a teenage girl. The girl is clutching a skateboard. Everyone smiles tentatively. "Hallo Ellie," say the husband and wife preparing Christmas lunch. The girl notices the skateboard propped up near the front door. The man, seeing her gaze, shrugs; "I'm trying to skateboard," he says, smiling shyly and showing a bandaged hand. "Would you like to come in?" says the wife. As the new foster father leads Ellie further into the house he notices Ellie's skateboard stickers, and mentally puts that down on his to-do list.

Across the last screen flashes the message: "108k children in the UK are in the care system."

People across the UK love this ad. "Bravo to John Lewis!" "That's a good message!" "Heartwarming!" "One of the best ones I've seen!" they say. They note, "We are in a cost-of-living crisis and this advertisement is bare bones." "We can't overindulge or spend big this year." "A lot of people who have experienced foster care appreciate the focus on a different kind of family and support for foster care."

What **we** see in this Christmas ad is a person preparing to receive into their life a child, with a passionate commitment to do the best they can to make themselves someone the child can relate to, someone who can experience the newcomer's passion and participate in it with her. The new foster father is pretty hopeless at this activity but doesn't give up, despite pain and aches and looking like an old geezer trying a young sport. He keeps on trying, and the light in the child's eyes when she realizes he cares for her passion, is worth every bruise, every humiliation. **This** is the priceless gift beyond anything.

And it is a simple gift. Preparing to share skateboarding is a small and seemingly unimportant, even frivolous, sort of gift, but it is an act of hope and healing and communion that welcomes the young person by entering into her world.

In the face of the world's great needs, such are the small acts that we can do to bring wholeness and restore hope.

Wherever we are in our life's journey, Advent gives us an opportunity to renew our focus and effort to get ready to enter into the life of our Lord, whose kingdom we are preparing for. We stumble, we fall, we get up again, review our mistakes, apply the cold compress of absolution and begin again and again to conform ourselves to the love and will of our Lord and Saviour.

And when the day comes that we enter into that life, we will see that light of recognition and joy in the eyes of the One who loves us so, and who receives our gift of persistence and faith, and heals all the scrapes and bruises and turns our failures to good and enfolds us in joy.

Amen.