

Advent 3 2020
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1 Thess 5:16-24; John 1: 6-8, 19-28
December 13, 2020, St. John's Sharon, Pandemic Worship Service

Happy Advent! We are learning about waiting this year. We are also learning these days about good news shining into the midst of darkness and how we have to live in that tension.

A vaccine is coming. Some health care workers in our community have been told they will get vaccinated before the end of 2020. Even with all the transportation and distribution issues and various other questions, the information over the past few weeks about the successful vaccine tests and roll-out counts as serious good news.

At the same time, we are still living in darkness. COVID cases are many times higher in our region than they have been at any other time in the epidemic. We have had to suspend in person worship because of COVID exposures, and then because the exposures were too common to gather safely indoors in-person. Multiple people in our parish family have tested positive, and we have been praying hard for them and other family members and friends, while doing what we can to keep each other safe. At our last food pantry distribution, we gave away all the food we had prepared, and scrambled to do what we could for the last stragglers. About a third of the people who showed up were new to us, since there have been fewer open food distributions in the area lately, and many people are struggling as the pandemic economic slowdown continues. Many of us are looking forward to a Christmas that does not include being together with all of our family members or being together in this sanctuary with our church family. The darkness of these days is not limited to the quickly fading daylight. We might never have lived through a Christmas where it was so appropriate to sing "In the bleak midwinter."

We can learn something about our Advent waiting as we wait for a vaccine. First and foremost, we can learn that things can be very bad today AND that there is something amazing going to happen in the future. A safe, effective vaccine is coming. At some point in the next six months, our hospitals will not be filling up with COVID patients and we are going to be able to visit our parents and our grandchildren again. And that day is not today. We can somehow learn to hold the reality of both the present and the future in our minds at once, without despairing for the future and without ignoring the difficulties of the present.

We have this same difficulty in our Advent waiting for the coming of Christ. Here, I am not talking so much of a four-week season before Christmas, but of the way that Advent weaves into the experience of our lives. The COVID epidemic is not the only problem in the world today, and may not even be the worst one. We don't have to list them all to know that we have some issues, and that all the work we have done to make life better has not fixed everything yet. We have been promised that Jesus is returning and he will bring a new heaven and a new earth, a time when all of Isaiah's prophecies of lions and lambs lying down together will come to fruition. Maintaining a faith in Christ's return and having our eyes open about the suffering around us today can be hard. We see many people decide that if the world is this messed up, God can't be real, while others throw up their hands, ignore people's needs, and make plans to be on a mountain top for the end of the world. Just like we have to stay distanced and wear masks until

the vaccine actually gets here, we have to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and visit the sick and bury the dead until Jesus shows back up and gives us different instructions.

The second thing we learn about waiting is that we are waiting for what is to come and not what was. When Jesus came as a babe in the manger, many were waiting for a Messiah that would restore and build upon what they saw as the glory days of the Kingdom of Israel. They were disappointed. Similarly, today, many are expecting that once a vaccine comes life immediately resets to sometime last year. But we are different people today. We have suffered losses, we have learned new behaviors, and we have found some new solutions. When a vaccine comes, we may still wear masks when we feel sick or during the height of the annual flu season. We may continue to shop on-line, and there are some meetings I will be happy not to drive an hour to get to at night in the snow. We may still want to stream church to those in nursing homes, while also having the church full of people staying for coffee hour afterwards. In the same way, Jesus is not coming in order to take us back to recreate so happier past time. Scripture begins in Genesis with a garden, but Revelation ends with a new city. We don't know what the Kingdom of God will be exactly, but the healing and wholeness Jesus brings will be for who we are, not for who we were.

Finally, we can learn from this time to recognize and value the blessings we experience while we wait. This COVID year has brought some good things. Many folks have had to slow down, have been able to spend time with those they live with, have taken long walks, said new prayers, or found a different time for quiet. I think most of us can point to things that have sustained us amid the various losses we have experienced. We can acknowledge both the losses and the blessings. Paul in the reading this morning talks about this when he says, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." In every situation, we can find things to be grateful for and to talk to God about, and to rejoice in, because God remains present with us. There is a beauty and joy to this season of Advent that is different from Christmas after it or the green season that precedes it. There is also beauty and joy in this life, even as we wait for Jesus to come. Amidst the pain and struggle, there are amazing moments that do cause us to rejoice, to spontaneously proclaim the goodness of God, and feel our hearts overflowing with gratitude. Looking for those moments in every situation is what Paul would have us focus on, even in the midst of a pandemic while we wait for a vaccine. And when we do look for those moments, we usually find them. Again and again and again. The fact that we can get easily distracted and forget to look is why we need Advent. Waiting teaches us to stop and look for hope and good news. As we look, we find not only the future fulfilment of our hopes, but also the love and joy that is here in the present.

This COVID period of time is lasting longer than we want, but it will not last forever. While we wait for the vaccine, let's learn what we can about waiting well, so that we can wait well for something greater than a human medical miracle. Marantha. Come, Lord Jesus.