

- 1) **ADVENT: It's a way of saying "countdown to Christmas"**
in a somewhat religious sounding tone of voice.
It's a "church talk" way of announcing: *Only X number of days left until . . .*
Candles on Advent wreaths mark the countdown weekly.
Advent calendars from Hallmark track the totally predictable progression one day at a time—
a month of little windows, behind which hide a sequence of season-themed pictures—
each window to be opened when its day arrives—but not one day before.
Anticipation heightens, momentum builds, children *just can't wait*, but they have no choice.
At least everybody knows what they're waiting for,
and just how much longer they have to wait.
And, in the end, it is well worth waiting for.

- 2) If you've been coming to church for a while,
you probably know that each year in Advent we hear Sunday Gospel readings
that underscore this growing sense of expectation: *Christmas is coming—*
Advent 2: John the Baptist, crying in the wilderness—*He's coming—prepare!*
Advent 3: John the Baptist, yet again, and still more urgent—*He's coming—repent!*
Advent 4: An angel announcing to Mary or Joseph—*He's coming—Fear NOT!*
Then Christmas Eve: *He's Here at Last—Glory to God—Surprising to shepherds, but not to us.*
The Christ Child is born, just like we expected, a Gift to be celebrated with gifts all around!

- 3) But Advent Sunday Number One—today's announcement—it doesn't seem to fit that flow.
Like those later lessons, it does name expectations and raise anticipation
about what is coming down the road—which would be Jesus—one way or another.
But the images that have just been flashed before our eyes—
a flood—a thief—a worker in a field and woman grinding meal, both swept away—
Hallmark would hardly print those pictures on its Advent calendars.
Peace on earth announced by angels about an infant Jesus in a manger—
What today stands in the way of this annual, seasonal journey to visit the Christ Child?
It's a series of dire warnings about the end of the world—
and these announcements delivered by a very adult Jesus soon to be crucified.

- 4) Who allowed this harsh sounding Gospel reading
to crash our otherwise eager anticipation celebration?
The standard, simple, but not so simple answer is that, in Advent,
we celebrate not only the first coming of Jesus,
we anticipate His second coming also—His coming again "in power and great triumph".
A second act wouldn't be a problem if it topped the first act called CHRISTMAS!
But what's with this immanent gloom and doom—coming for sure—but we know not when?
What, in Advent, does it mean for us to claim that the Christ Who came will come again?

5) The strident words of warning we hear today from Jesus by way of Matthew's Gospel— they were spoken first to disciples living in a highly threatening world— danger and chaos always looming just around the corner.

Yet this, at least, has served for them as a distraction from their anxiety— the sheer, stunning splendor of Herod's temple.

It is beautiful, substantial—a symbol of God's enduring presence.

Maybe, just maybe, the disciples figure, as long as the temple stands, things might eventually turn out all right, after all.

As a nation, time and again, their fellow Hebrews have suffered through what EACH time has seemed, in the moment, to be the very END of time— the collapse of the social order that appeared to be

the guarantee of stable, dependable spiritual meaning.

But here, now, to lose the temple—

that would surely signal for these followers of Jesus the end of the world, full stop.

Nevertheless, weaving together images and phrases

of previous prophets who had warned of earlier disasters,

Jesus delivers to His close associates an utterly disorienting word:

the destruction of the temple was indeed both inevitable and immanent.

6) By the time that Matthew recorded these warnings of Jesus, this world-shattering event had, in fact, passed from prophecy into history.

Of what had been the temple, "not one stone was left upon another."

After the fact, reprising these alarming words of Jesus;

what expectations and anticipation was Matthew seeking to engender in succeeding generations of Jesus followers?

What is Matthew telling them, telling us, about the Second Advent of the Prince of Peace?

Four Things:

- 1) That regardless of how impressive and impregnable they appear in the moment, NO configuration of social/political/religious symbols or structures is the be all and end all of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Reign of Christ.
- 2) That seeming sure-fire crisis prevention or eradication strategies promised and propagated by charismatic, self-serving tribal leaders— these will all collapse just as surely as they arise.
- 3) That those who bear witness to the coming Reign of Christ will predictably be persecuted by whatever Powers happen to Be.
- 4) That such witness, however, is neither a misplaced commitment nor a waste of time. Undertaken with a shrewdly discerning and patiently watchful eye, this witness you and I bear to the coming Peace of Christ is our expression of obedience to God's promise of hope.

7) The bottom line of what Jesus counsels in Matthew's Gospel:

We are to live in continual expectation of the coming of the Son of Man whose presence will appear "at an unexpected hour"

an hour that will presage the ending of the world—and its radically new beginning.

We are, in short, to expect the unexpected—a peace that passes understanding.

A peace we can't produce, but for which we can prepare.

**This “coming again” of Jesus can be anticipated, worked toward, and provisionally encountered
in every act of compassionate kindness that we offer,
in every strategic initiative for justice that we initiate,
in every fresh meeting of His Promised Presence that we experience
when we gather with one another around God's Holy Table.**

**8) At this “coming again,” God will, as Isaiah envisions, in God's good time,
TRANSPOSE time itself.**

**God will interdict the endless, vicious cycle, of back and forth, strife and war—strife and war—
God will radically reorder THAT time INTO a time marked
by nations and peoples coming together and climbing up—
reaching out to take firm hold of the peace education
that comes flowing down from the Mountain of the Lord.**

So, in anticipation of THAT day, together WE pray on THIS day:

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free.

From our sins and fears, release us; let us find our hope in thee.

**We pray this, trusting and confident, that, in the end,
this coming will be well worth waiting for.**