

Advent Lutheran Church
Pay Attention
December 1, 2024
Jeremiah 33:14-16 & Luke 21:25-36

I wonder what your family normally does the day after Thanksgiving. Personally, I'm grateful to now be living in the year 2024 and not in one of the years gone by when everyone was expected to get up early and to chase after something called Black Friday Sales. For those of you too young to understand, ask one of your elders about this capitalistic ritual from the era when people still primarily shopped in brick-and-mortar stores.

Ask them how early they woke up.

Ask them how they chose which of the incredible deals they would strive to secure.

Ask them about standing in line for hours just to get in a store in order to possibly be eligible to stand in another long line to buy the item.

This morning, I'm inviting you to pay attention. Pay attention to what's happening all around you.

In years gone by the Black Friday Sales captured everyone's attention. They were a cultural sign that the season had arrived. While they may have called it Christmas Shopping Season and understood it as a countdown clock until Christmas, we can see it as one of many ways prepare or get ready for what is to come.

Now, in a world with 24 hour a day shopping available from anywhere you and your phone go, that style of shopping feels quaint and outdated.

Instead, we are besieged by Christmas decorating. How soon is too soon to put up a tree or to decorate your yard? Can people even ask that question anymore? Pay attention. Look around as you drive about. Christmas Decorating Season, another preparatory practice is well underway.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It is also the first Sunday of the Christian year. We start with waiting – with an entire season of waiting. You might go so far as to call this the Christmas Preparation Season.

Whether this is all very new to you or if you bring decades of experience, this year I invite you to watch closely and to really pay attention. Yes, it is good you noticed the Advent decorations have been added to the sanctuary since we gathered last week. Your observations can and should draw you in. They should beckon you to a season of waiting and wondering – of actively preparing for what is coming and for the One who is coming.

I wonder if you paid attention to this morning's Scripture readings. They probably are not among your all-time favorites and they may not have sounded familiar at all. They are, however, texts that come up once every three years as the assigned readings for the first Sunday of Advent.

In the short passage from Jeremiah you may have noticed words of hope – hope in the form of a messianic promise. Jeremiah tells us that “a righteous branch” will someday sprout from David's line.

What you don't get from these selected verses is the overwhelming doom and gloom of a people who have endured the unthinkable. Jerusalem had been destroyed by a Babylonian invasion and they are now living as exiles wondering where God is and how God has allowed this to happen. Frankly, they are beginning to question all of God's promises.

It is to these people and at that time that the prophet Jeremiah speaks about the hope that is to come. The one who will come from David's line will be known as “the Lord Our Righteous Savior” (v.16).

Pay attention. God is promising that God's ways of righteousness and justice are coming.

Live into Advent. Be patient. Keep waiting and wondering.

Then, in Luke's Gospel we hear another challenging passage. And right in the middle of it is a parable. It is a more straightforward parable that we are accustomed to.

Jesus basically says to his first century audience, "You know fig trees well but the same is true for other trees too: if you pay attention you'll see the early signs that the leaves are coming in, which signals a new season is about to arrive. The same can be said about the kingdom of God."

What you don't get from the parable that you begin to see more clearly in the full passage is that this message is being delivered in a rough time. A time when people feel more is going wrong in the world than usual. In fact, a modern paraphrase renders the start of this passage in this way

"It will seem like all hell has broken loose - sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking." (v.26-27, The Message)

So in both the Old Testament reading and in the Gospel reading the recipients of the messages are living through challenging times. There are plenty of reasons to feel discouraged.

This was true in Jeremiah's time. It was true in Jesus' time. And, it is true in our time as well.

Be honest. Are you anxious about the times we are living in?

Are you worried about the economy?

Are you uncomfortable with the introduction of religion into our public schools?

Are you concerned about the possibility of a mass deportation of many of our neighbors?

Or perhaps your worries lie elsewhere. What I do know is this: many in our midst feel scared and many feel anxious. Many fear what is happening and what may be ahead.

And so we start a new church year by reorienting ourselves.

Surely you paid attention when the first candle of the Advent wreath was lit to begin this service. And I trust that you remember this is not just any candle; it is the candle of hope.

Siblings in Christ, I don't know about you but for me one of the reasons I am here today is hope. Because I am a person of faith, I am filled with hope and I am reminded that hope calls us to look toward the future – the future God intends for us and for all of creation.

Advent takes time. You can rush if you wish, but I promise you Christmas won't come before December 25th.

This year Advent will support you on your Advent journey. On Sunday's we'll continue to explore traditional texts together with the theme of waiting and wondering. And, on Wednesdays we'll hear and respond to new texts in the form of Christmas letters written to us by some of the people who were there.

Pay attention. Advent is here.

Amen.