

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. I don't know about you, but I am so thankful this season is here. To me it is one of the most beautiful times of the whole year, even the word is beautiful. . .
Advent

Do you know what it means? The word basically means coming or arrival. I looked up some synonyms and found the words: emergence, birth and dawn

Dawn is really strong image, isn't it? The gradual seeping in of color and warmth into places of darkness. . . until every surface is touched and changed by light.

Karl Barth wrote: **Unfulfilled promises and fulfilled promises are related to each other, as are dawn and sunrise. . . If anywhere at all, then it is precisely in the light of the coming of Christ that faith has become Advent faith, the expectation of future revelation."**

On Christmas we celebrate the radiant arrival of the sun, during Advent we look forward to it.

I learned a little bit about the history of Advent, that in the 4th and 5th centuries in Spain and Gaul, Advent was a time of preparation for baptisms that would take place on the feast of Epiphany in January. Christians would spend 40 days in prayer and fasting to prepare for this celebration. Then in the 6th century, it seems that Roman Christians had linked Advent directly to the coming of Christ, but with the primary emphasis being on Christ's SECOND coming. Apparently it was not until the middle ages that Christ's first coming—that we celebrate a Christmas—was clearly linked to Advent.

I think that line of the Christmas song, probably my favorite Christmas song, sums up Advent pretty well: "*O Come O Come Emmanuel . . . and ransom captive Israel*"

These days during Advent we focus BOTH on the remembrance of Christ's first coming which fulfilled God's promises to Israel AND we focus on the expectation of the second coming, for the promised *return* of Christ,

So actually it is a time of both memory and anticipation. That is why the Gospel text that we heard today focuses primarily on the anticipation of the second coming.

Our expectation now and the expectation experienced by the biblical characters are certainly linked.

While Advent tends to be such a lovely, happy time with lights and carols and many delicious things, traditionally it was also a time that bore similarities to Lent, a time to also reflect on the experiences of *exile . . . of waiting, of the darkness that still lurks*, A time of saying: Emmanuel come, oh please when will you come??

This brings me to the second metaphor, that of birth—or even more so of *pregnancy*—because if Christmas is the birthday, then Advent is the pregnancy and labor. . . which is actually quite a useful metaphor.

This year is an especially special Advent for me, the only Advent in which I will be, along with Elizabeth and Mary, in the period of hopeful preparation for the birth of a firstborn son.

So I, of course, had to use this Advent sermon as a chance to reflect a bit on what this season means.

The New Testament Gospel narrative basically starts with a pregnancy story, or two.

I say two because in Luke's Gospel we also get to read the foregrounding story of Elizabeth and Zachariah's long-awaited, long prayed-for pregnancy with Jesus' (cousin?) John, John the Baptist

In fact, Zachariah and Elizabeth are *so* old at the time that the angel Gabriel comes to tell Zach the news, that he doesn't even believe the angel at first! But sure enough, Elizabeth becomes pregnant with John.

This occurs before Gabriel then makes an appearance to Mary, then Joseph, to announce that Mary would bear the holy Christ child.

I just LOVE the story of what happens next, when Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and how the text says that John LEAPT in his mother's womb . . . as though baby John just knew, without even having to see, that he was in the presence of the Savior.

So yes, the Gospel starts with pregnancy stories. And how is Advent is like pregnancy?

Well pregnancy is also a time of the *already* and the *not yet*.

Often it is an answer to prayer but also a time of anxious anticipation for the promise to be fulfilled, to become real.

in some ways the child, this new life, is already there . . . but in a way also not there. It is both a present and a future reality

Of course you prepare, as best you can, for the baby's arrival, out of faith, faith that that new being is actually going to one day join you out in the light.

If we want to go ahead and take this metaphor a little further, into the very *human* dimension — we can be honest in saying that there are plenty of aspects of pregnancy that are just really unpleasant. There is exhaustion, nausea, and discomfort.

And then as labor approaches, there is *real pain* and gore and struggle.

And there are ways in which the whole process is shrouded in mystery. The child is as close to you as can be, and yet it is hard to picture what the baby's arrival will be like, how much it will hurt, or what the new relationship will be like. You know the child's presence will change everything, will turn your life upside down, but who will *you* be in this new reality? How will you handle it? It is easy to worry, to be afraid.

And yet, in the midst of it all, you can actually feel these little stirrings inside, these movements that grow in strength and frequency . . . And that is miraculous.

The absolute wonder of that experience reminds you of the beauty of this process.

it's a reminder of what you HOPE for: which is the JOY of the ARRIVAL of this new life!

While writing this sermon I was amazed to realize just how many times in Scripture the metaphor of labor and birth is actually used.

For example in Matthew 24 we see, also in reference to the end times: “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. **7** Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. **8** All these are the beginning of birth pains...”

And in John 16 verse 21 we read: “Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world.”

SO, in many ways, pregnancy and birth really do mirror the experience of Advent and yet the **arrival** that Advent anticipates is even greater.

Let's listen again to the beginning of our Gospel reading for today (Luke 21:25-28):

“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. . . **When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**”

And once more from our Psalm (Psalm 25:3): **“No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame”**

I'd like to take the next few moments to take a closer look at a character who shows us what this active hope looks like, **who stood and lifted his head, knowing that redemption was drawing near.**

This is once again, our friend, the EPIC character, John the Baptist.

The angel Gabriel told his parents that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb and that he would “turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He would go forth in the spirit and the power of the great prophet Elijah. He would turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, **to make the people ready for the Lord!!**

Wow. His calling in life was so clear from day one.

And the way that he is portrayed in the Bible, as well as in so many wonderful icons and paintings throughout art history, is as someone who was not really concerned with anything *other* than this call. He did not care about material things or earthly comforts. He lived out in the desert, wearing camel hair and eating locusts and honey (which sounds disgusting).

He just had a **singleness of purpose**, and that purpose was letting people know that the time was now, that the Messiah was coming. He told them to repent and be baptized and to share whatever they had with those in need.

He said (Matt. 3:11): “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is greater than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**”

Has anyone seen the musical, ‘Godspell’? In that musical the character of John the Baptist goes around singing the same line over and over again:

**“Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Prepare ye the way of the Lord”*

He just keeps singing this over and over, and slowly, more people join him until eventually it is a whole chorus singing that line. It is a really powerful moment.

And I just love it. Whenever I think of John the baptist, it is that song playing in my head.

And the point I want to make here is: that this is our call too, to join that chorus singing *“Prepare ye the way of the Lord.”*

In this spirit of preparation our focus is forward. Our Gospel reading from Luke 21 is about the second coming of the Son of Man, about the waiting and even the agony of the waiting, but still, the focus is up, is forward, is on what is coming, on *arrival*.

So what could it mean for us to be on the watch, to prepare?

Well, it is certainly an ACTIVE waiting, not a passive one.

It is the agony and darkness we still see in the world around us that inspires us to **urgency**.

But all the while our **focus** is on the hope. We have a future-orientation.

I listened to a wonderful podcast with the Franciscan monk and spiritual teacher, Richard Rohr. He quoted Pope Francis who said: “The Church is not an antiquarian society. Too much of church history has been a love affair with the past.”

Richard Rohr goes on to say that in the Gospels we see Jesus moving ahead in history.

Often we fear the future because it is mysterious and it means letting go. But **God is actually in love with the future!**

We trust that the future will bring further realization of the kingdom of God. The future will bring answered prayers and promises fulfilled.

And here's the thing: **we** are called to be a part of bringing this to reality. Every Sunday we pray "*Your kingdom come on earth as it in heaven.*"

We prepare the coming, we till the ground, we beat the weapons into farming tools. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we work to bring healing and justice to this earth.

We may not get to see the completion of this work, but we mold the stepping stones, we lay the bricks for future generations to continue building, preparing this WAY of the Lord.

When we need encouragement we can think about the people who came before us and began the work that we continue.

Think, for example, of Martin Luther King Jr. His story has some similarities to that of John the Baptist. Both of their lives were cut short too early because of others' hatred for the prophetic work they were doing. Both of them, like Moses also, died before getting to see all the fruits of their labor. John the Baptist didn't get to see the full story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection unfold...but he did play the part he was called to play. We don't really know what John's last words were. But maybe they would have sounded something like these words spoken by Martin Luther King Jr in Memphis April 3, 1963 in Memphis, on the very eve of his assassination. I quote:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*"

Can you imagine? Those are the last words of the last speech he gave. Talk about standing up and lifting ones head, in the faith that redemption is near. It expresses the Advent feeling of already and not yet. It is aware that the hard times are not over, but it also shows ultimate hope.

Our Advent hope is grounded in Jesus' story, in the fulfillment of promises that it reminds us of.

In the interim that we live in, we *miss* God, we long for God. At yet at the same time, God is already here, we feel the stirrings, we see the signs. The best is yet to come. So let us, together, *prepare the way of the Lord.* Amen.