

**A Sermon Preached
at
St. George's Madrid
by
The Reverend Canon John W. Kilgore, M.D.
1 December 2019
I Advent
Isaiah 2: 1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13: 11-14
Matthew 24: 36-44**

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

Happy New Year! Yes, Happy New Year!

Today is the first Sunday in Advent and the beginning of our church year. The New Year. Last week was the Feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday in the church year, and this Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, is the beginning of our church year. Sort of like last Sunday was New Year's Eve and today is New Year's Day...

We have a Church Year, and a church year calendar to celebrate the different seasons of our liturgical year. They are defined seasons and there is a purpose to their arrangement. In nature winter is a time of rest, decay, cleansing of dead trees, limbs and branches. While less intense and less often here, in many places ice and snow freeze the ground to make it soft and gentle for the development of tender roots in the spring. Spring gives new growth for photosynthesis in summer, and autumn sees life die back and rest throughout the winter.

Likewise, in our church year we have seasons of abundance and growth, and seasons of rest and quiet and reflection. Like nature the seasons build on one another, are cyclic, and renew us. So, in the Church Year we are in the season of Advent, not the Christmas season, although the secular world sees it differently, what with Black Friday and all.

Advent is that season of the four Sundays before Christmas and whatever weekdays fall in between until Christmas Day, marked as 25 December. The term Advent comes from the Latin *Adventus*, meaning 'coming.' The season is observed as a time of preparation, not only for Christmas, the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, but also a time of preparation for the Second Coming of Christ as Judge at the Last Day. Advent is a season of waiting, preparation, and expectation. It was formerly kept much like Lent, though with less strictness. Fasting is no longer such an important part of Advent (thankfully, given the holiday festivities in our culture today!). However, festivities are generally discouraged and the mood of the season is solemn. You will note that the color is purple, or blue in some places, and that the *Gloria in Excelsis* is omitted, as are Alleluias. And the music is intentionally more somber, not the joy of Christmas and Christmas carols. The hymns are more about the **coming** of Jesus, not his presence in the world. We characteristically wait until Christmas to sing Christmas carols.

The readings for the four Sundays in Advent remind us of those who prepared the world for the coming of Christ. They roughly follow the outline of the Patriarchs, the Prophets, John the Baptist, and the Virgin Mary. Heralds of the coming of Christ. Foretellers of Jesus' coming into the world. It is only at Christmas that we tell the story of his birth and the stories of the responses, the shepherds, the wise men and such. You will note in the readings in Advent that they are not about Jesus' actions, like they are in the season immediately after Easter, but rather they are about end time considerations, the broader picture — "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son of Man, but only the Father..." "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming..."

So as we think about the **coming** of Christ, the *Adventus* particularly as foretold by the patriarchs, prophets, John the Baptist, and Mary, we are in the Advent seasonal mood of anticipation, expectation, waiting, and preparation.

Big life events, require planning and preparation, and include waiting, anticipation, and expectation. You don't have a birth and bear a child without nine months of pregnancy, preparing the nursery, selecting a name, purchasing baby clothes, notifying the relatives, etc. You don't have a big party, say graduation or a zero ending birthday or anniversary, without planning the event, selecting the guests to be invited, choosing the venue and outlining the meal, and the speeches.. And a concert doesn't occur, a sports team doesn't play a game, without planning and preparation and practice rehearsing and motivating the orchestra or team. We have Lent before we have Easter, and we have Advent, this season of waiting and expectation, before we have Christmas. Planning and expectation before joy and celebration. Preparation and anticipation and waiting are the season of Advent.

When big events are coming it is important to plan for them, to prepare, and to be ready, not only physically but also emotionally. And, spiritually. Like Lent before Easter, our hearts and souls need tending and caring in preparation, in contrast to the busy nature of the season in the world. We need a few minutes, moments, of quiet and calm and relaxation. How many times have you heard someone say, 'I don't really like Christmas...I can't wait for it to be over...there is too much to do.' Or, lamentably, 'it's not a happy time for me,' memories or anniversaries or events. Sad. For Christmas is that foundational happening on which our Christian faith is based and it should be a big event and be planned for and prepared for.

And events are so much more special when they are planned for, anticipated, and waited on. Our Advent traditions call us to that. Lighting of the Advent wreath, only one candle at a time. Not lighting the whole wreath at once. Advent calendars, opening one window each day, by the children. Intermittently and regularly stirring the Christmas pudding.

So what do we do about this? How do we live into it? How do we prepare our hearts and souls for a good celebration of Christmas, not saying, 'I really don't like Christmas...I can't wait for it to be over...'

Overall, I suggest a little extra quiet time. Some time to quiet your soul and give God a chance to talk to you, to tap you on the shoulder, to wrap you in His Love. And you don't even have to say anything, or actively pray. Just sit intentionally in quiet. Sometimes our prayers, our efforts, our busy-ness, get in our way.

I was told a great story this week.

The village priest preached a great sermon on praying. Giving everyone profound theological concepts, a list of things to pray for, several useful phrases, and an overriding 'outline' or structure of prayer he thought he had done a good job. And received a number of compliments as parishioners departed. However, as he walked home and approached his house, he passed under the large oak tree and heard a young voice reciting the alphabet, over and over. He stopped under the tree, looked up, and indeed his young son was up in the tree reciting the alphabet.

"What are you doing saying the alphabet over and over?" queried the priest of his son.

"Well, I hear your sermon and I know I am supposed to pray but I really don't know how, and didn't understand all that you said. So I am saying all of the letters of the alphabet. I decided to just say all the letters of the alphabet and let God put them together however He thinks best. He would know better than I what I should want and what I should say..."

So often we pray the rote prayers we have been taught. I know I fall back on the Lord's Prayer, or the *Magnificat*, or the *Nunc Dimitis* or a couple of psalms. Some people know many of the Psalms by heart. All good. But perhaps **we** don't need to do all the talking but rather to trust a bit more in God's side of the conversation.

For God isn't so interested in our adhering to the rules, or in our following the prescribed regulations of fasting or observing Advent as He is interested in where our hearts are. And that is what Advent is about. Preparing our hearts and minds and souls and making time, making room, for God. So give Him a chance! Take some quiet time this Advent, and be ready, really ready, for Christmas.

Amen.