

244 Advent Now!

(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "Advent Now!", originally shared on December 14, 2022. It was the 244th video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bpHKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)

Churches throughout the world will celebrate the fourth Sunday in Advent this Sunday with the Christmas Story! Why? Are we impatient children, shaking the wrapped presents under the tree? Today, we're going to find out.

We're going to read the Christmas story from Matthew this coming Sunday. It's the second most relatable story of Jesus' birth.

Luke is the longest and most familiar in the four Gospels. Mark skips it entirely. John is written for a non-Jewish audience and describes the birth in abstract, philosophical terms.

We're in the year of Matthew, though, and Matthew gives us the barest of bones for the story, in **Matthew 1:18-25**,

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

But, why are we proclaiming this story now? We're still in the season of Advent, the season of preparation and of waiting, not of the event itself, Christmas.

I used to be an Advent purist. "No Christmas carols until Christmas." "It's not Christmas until Christmas and then we have twelve days to sing the songs of Christmas while the world packs it away in the attic."

Then, one year, a woman in the congregation I was serving asked me why the only place she could hear Christmas carols was in the mall.

Maybe reading this lesson in Advent is a concession to an increasingly secular season, a way to get the word out as quickly as possible.

Or maybe it is a mistake, an operator error.

As with the woman who came to the point in her life where her family had grown to where buying Christmas presents for everyone was too much. She couldn't keep track of what everyone needed or wanted. So, she wrote a stack of checks and filled out a pile of Christmas cards, written to everyone with the message, "This year you can buy your own Christmas present 😊".

She brought them to the family gathering and passed them around.

Toward the end of the evening, she noticed that people were looking at her funny. Something wasn't quite right but she couldn't put her finger on it until she got home and saw, on her writing desk, a neat stack of checks.

All her family got from her that year was the message, "This year you can buy your own Christmas present!"

Or maybe it's because the people who put the Christmas story in Advent agreed with the pop a-week-after-Thanksgiving Christmas song from the Broadway musical "Mame", "We Need a Little Christmas":

"For we need a little Christmas

Right this very minute,

Candles in the window,

Carols at the spinet.

Yes, we need a little Christmas

Right this very minute.

It hasn't snowed a single flurry,

But Santa, dear, we're in a hurry;"

Except, that it has almost nothing to do with Christmas. We'll give "carols at the spinet" the benefit of the doubt. Traditions, by themselves, are not Christmas.

Or maybe this lesson is placed in Advent to bring us a word of hope: redemption is just around the corner. The second coming will come just as the first one did, after God's people waited for a very long time.

I saw that someone online recently pointed out that we are now closer to 2072 than to 1972. That's putting things in perspective.

Paul gives us a similar wake-up call in **Romans 13:11-14**,

11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Paul uses "the flesh" as a technical term referring to those who have not put on the Lord Jesus Christ, those who are not yet Christians.

He tells those who are Christians to wake up! To start being who they are! To live lives that reflect their status as a New Creation!

He calls us to live as people living between the two advents.

We don't know when Christ will return, therefore we are to be ready at all times.

I heard of someone saying once, "I live every day as if it were my last. That's why I never do laundry, because who wants to do laundry on the last day of their life?"

OK, maybe that's a bit too literal. 😊

The second advent of Jesus may come in the next millisecond or in the next millennium, there is no difference in terms of our preparation. The time to be on alert is right now.

I remember when, a couple of years ago, a stand-out high school football player had been successfully recruited by USC. He said, at the press conference that followed, "My mama always told us, 'If you stay ready, you don't have to get ready.'"

We find strength in the first coming of Jesus as we long for his second coming.

We stay ready.

"Advent" means "coming," and Christians have longed for it from the beginning.

Near the very end of the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, we see one of the first prayers of the Church, in **Revelation 22:20**,

20 The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The word "Maranatha", which has roots in ancient Greek and ancient Aramaic, is familiar to many Christians. It means "O Lord, come." It has been the Church's prayer from the earliest days of the Church.

The world has been celebrating a faux Christmas for months now with a frenzy of buying and selling, with pastel-colored harmonies of easy-listening elevator music and Christmas radio, with snowmen where there is no snow, with a baseless and cliché-ridden call for peace on earth, a nostalgia for imagined Christmases past, vapid angels and a whistling in the dark with all the things that Christmas is not.

We don't need that kind of Christmas. At all.

So, here we are in Matthew.

What we need is an advent. We long for that second advent, the Second Coming of Christ, at least as much as we celebrate His first advent.

We pray that that second advent might come as the first one did.

And we pray that it might come soon. Advent now! Amen. Come Lord Jesus."