

Pacing for Jesus

The first texts of Advent always seem to catch us off guard. Even though we are relieved that we finally no longer must stare at the same green altar dressing characteristic of Pentecost and have now moved on from hearing Luke's gospel to the Matthean narrative, we never have the opportunity to ease gently into Advent. It confronts us; it startles us. Right around the time that the Western world, not yet having recovered from Thanksgiving and fall festivities, begins to gear up for the hustle and bustle of holiday consumerism, the nonstop parties and tense family gatherings, full swing ahead towards Chanukah and Christmas and Kwanzaa and any other celebration that mandates excessive gift purchasing and stress, we encounter Advent. We begin our new year; the church calendar begins afresh. We enter a season that requires that we do the opposite of every pull and force around us, even more confusing because these temptations and charges to do more, be better than the Joneses, prove ourselves to be more competent than last year—all often come in the guise of Christmas cheer, as ways that we celebrate Jesus' birth.

And yet today we are jolted awake. Now admittedly, the text does not resonate with us as it would most likely have with the original audience. Unlike Matthew and early Christians, we cannot say that we believe that Christ will soon come to judge the world, that the world will experience trial and tribulation, detriment, death, and renewal.

Neither have we fought in war against Romans, culminating in the destruction of the Temple, which was the symbol of God's dedication to the special people Israel. The individuals to whom Matthew wrote had likely seen this hallmark of their own and their friends' and neighbors' faith torn from beneath them. The security that they knew existed no longer; the world seemed near collapse. The gospel's words spoke to those who knew (firsthand or from reports) of the siege of Jerusalem, which effectively

ended the Jewish-Roman War. The first readers of the Gospel according to Matthew likely read it as the fumes of ruin -- and failed promises -- still hovered in the air. The war had been a time when many Jews (including some who were Christian) expected divine intervention, believing God was ushering in a new order. And Matthew responds, calls everyone to attention: God *will* pass judgment on the world—on how we human beings behaved towards one another, creation, and the divine. For Matthew’s audience, their world, their sufferings, their trials possessed meaning and was part of a long trajectory of God’s activity in the world of making and remaking.

The situation of Matthew’s audience is not our own. The Black Friday shopping rampages each year may seem to signal impending doom and the dawn of something new, but most of us do not wait on edge each day for Jesus to descend again and angels to whisk us away. We hear phrases like “taken” and “unexpected hour,” and the picture painted is of an apocalyptic moment. Matthew invokes feelings of discomfort, uneasiness, and fear—the Son of Man could return any day, any hour, any minute, and we must always be ready. We can never rest; we must always be on guard.

But two thousand years have past without a second coming. It seems that we are still waiting.

If we jump too quickly to this conclusion, however, we miss the other side of Matthew’s gospel—in fact, of the entire gospel, of Christ’s witness to us. We so confidently wait for Jesus to return in glory because Jesus has already come and continues to work among us, but the fullness of God’s reality has not yet arrived. The gospel asks us to hold onto the knowledge that God has already appeared in the midst of all the world’s suffering and joy—has experienced its absolute depths in the human flesh—and promises more. Things are not now as they should be. Jesus is here already and not yet: already, in moments of redemption and grace but not

yet, because there still exists tragedy and injustice. This is what we do in Advent: we work to hold together hope and longing.

So Advent invites us to go against the grain of the holidays. These weeks leading up to the remembrance of our Savior's arrival to this earth usher us to delve deep into our faith. We contemplate, we search, we anticipate: we remember once again that we need a Savior, why we need a Savior. We discover and renew our hope. We exercise restraint and delayed gratification, no mindless or easy task during this time of year in our culture.

I think back often to how my college chaplain would preach—not simply what he said but how he embodied his message. At first when he would give sermons, it drove me crazy. He would not stand still but would pace back and forth across the floor, anxious it seemed, even slightly agitated. When I would listen, I never could “settle in,” never could become right at home. Only after hearing about a half dozen of his sermons did I realize that that was the point. I could not get comfortable. In fact, none of us listeners could get comfortable. No matter what the text or particular content of the sermon, my college chaplain communicated that we could not listen to God speak half-asleep. God nudged and pushed us endlessly; God called us to be wide-awake.

That especially is what Advent calls us to do. As we always should, but during this season especially, we become particularly aware and attentive, we pace. We look for God's presence among us but do not become complacent. We search in the confidence that God is here but that God's will for us has not yet become fully realized.

Part of our work, then, is acknowledging what is not right with the world. Take, for instance, twenty-first century observance of the holiday season. Something about Black Friday proves deeply disturbing. Black Friday (and now Cyber Monday) has resulted and continues to result for many in cycles of indebtedness and stress. The rambunctious crowds and frenzy created

by in-store sales can result in injury and even death.¹ This is the 2016 version of Noah's community's overindulgence and skewed morality.

Yet we must never rest here, with our criticism. We keep moving and seeking; we pace. We meet these moments of despair by looking for ways to uncover and shine Christ's light. We lift up and seek to magnify the good: the chain REI closed its stores this year on Friday and encouraged people instead to enjoy fresh air and "opt outside." Many go out to support small businesses on Small Business Saturday, and kind neighbors' hands extend to help those who are trampled by over exuberant shoppers. Holidays provide opportunities for us all to step outside of our everyday routines and see our lives with different eyes, and that is a very good thing.

We remain alert, always attentive and always working towards the expansion and completion of God's kingdom. We ready ourselves for Jesus. If we do not listen carefully and watch closely, we will miss him. Keep awake.

¹ There have been seven deaths and 98 injuries across the country during Black Friday shopping between 2006 and 2014, according to blackfridaydeathcount.com.

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.
O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!

Psalm 122

Laetatus sum

1 I was glad when they said to me, *

"Let us go to the house of the Lord."

2 Now our feet are standing *
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

3 Jerusalem is built as a city *
that is at unity with itself;

4 To which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord, *
the assembly of Israel,
to praise the Name of the Lord.

5 For there are the thrones of judgment, *
the thrones of the house of David.

6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: *
"May they prosper who love you.

7 Peace be within your walls *
and quietness within your towers.

8 For my brethren and companions' sake, *
I pray for your prosperity.

9 Because of the house of the Lord our God, *
I will seek to do you good."

Romans 13:11-14

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; 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; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 24:36-44

Jesus said to the disciples, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”