

December 1, 2019

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Last Sunday we experienced our first snowfall, albeit a wet and slushy snowfall. This past Thursday was, of course, Thanksgiving, and today is the first Sunday in Advent.

We are officially in the season of preparation and anticipation of the celebration of the birth of Christ, the Messiah, the promised one.

Doesn't seem possible, does it?

And yet as we have gathered for worship this morning and as we read the gospel text we might wonder why those who put together our lectionary would use this portion of Matthew's gospel that deals with the second coming of Christ. Aren't we supposed to be getting ready to celebrate his birth?

And I think that's always the surprise for us of the Advent season – we must be looking to both the birth of the Savior and to the second coming of Jesus. And just so Matthew's gospel text kind of hits us between the eyes, it makes us sit up, it may make us scratch our heads just a bit.

I think that's what this particular text is for, and not just as we read it in the season of Advent, but whenever we come across it. It tends to get our attention because it lets us know that we have no idea when the time will be that Jesus will return. And that can be off putting.

Here we are working hard, trying our best to get our act together so that our celebration of Christ's birth will be a joyous occasion, filled with traditional elements that mean so much to us. We, for the most part, know what needs to be done and we likely have a schedule, even if it a rough one that isn't yet written down.

We look forward to the celebration of Christ's birth, even though the days leading to it are hectic. Christmas is a time of gift giving and receiving, of being together with friends and loved ones. It is a time to try old tried-and-true recipes as well as a new one or two. We try to make the entire season one of joy, especially when our world seems to be more upside down than usual.

And now with the gospel before us we have to take a break, take a time out, to deal with this saying of Jesus about his return. I'm suggesting this morning that this is a good thing, not something that should frustrate us.

Today is the first day of this new season. And just so, Jesus would have us understand that for all we know and do and prepare for in our lives, and I'd include preparing for Christmas, there is at least one thing we do not know and that is when Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead.

And yet we profess that we believe that he could return at any moment. And so we need to spend some of our time and energy at some point in dealing with what that means for us and our relationship with Jesus and just how we prepare for the second coming if it should happen today, tomorrow or in our lifetime.

But do we need to do that as we being our Advent journey to Christmas. Apparently the answer is "yes."

So how do we fit it all in, how do we cope with preparing for Jesus' birth and his coming again? – you may ask.

Perhaps one answer is simply to adjust our mindset a little. When we are busy preparing our homes and hearts for the celebration of Christ's birth, can we expand our thinking process to think on and meditate on his second coming as well?

In other words, when we think of Christ coming to us as a baby in a manger, can we also have in the back of our minds the thought that as he comes in human form as a baby, he will also come again in glory? Can we get in the habit, if you will, of more and more realizing the fact that while we celebrate Christ's birth on the same day of each year, we really have no idea when he will return. And yet for both of these events we need to be prepared.

So maybe, just maybe, this new season of Advent is indeed right to begin with a gospel text that grabs our attention and makes us deal with it seriously without being offended that it is interrupting our seasonal preparations.

As we read our other texts for today, including the Psalm, we see an upbeat anticipation of the second coming of Christ. All is not dark and dreary. The writers of these texts are inviting us to be excited about the time when Christ returns, even though we don't have a clue when it will be. The second coming, just as the first, is an event that we need to prepare for, and anticipate with joy.

With that thought in mind, I read a blurb about a word that author Sharon Daloz Parks uses in her book entitled "Practicing Our Faith." That word is "cumber." I've heard of unencumber which is from the same root word, but I've never known the word cumber. Well it turns out that it is an old word that refers to the accumulation of goods and the buying of more that can weigh us down and make it difficult to perceive God's presence.

How many of us have more than we need lying around, taking us valuable space? How many of us add to this overabundance every so often?

Actually there is a movement afoot to reverse that trend. You are to go through your house from clothing to paperwork and keepsakes and keep the item only if it "sparks joy." If it doesn't – out it goes. Sell it, give it away, have someone come and take it away, but get it out of the house. And don't replace it. The idea is that we can be more satisfied and fulfilled if we have just the amount of stuff we truly need and no more. Good thought.

So, can we take that concept and use it during this season of Advent in a very conscious way? What might that look like?

Here's a suggestion that has to do with releasing cumber. And this could be done daily, or weekly or however it works best for you.

Start by selecting an item to purge from your home all the while meditating on the call to desire Christ above all things. What to do with this item? There are many options: give it to a friend or relative, sell it, or give it to any of the many agencies in our community that help out those truly in need, not only during this season, but throughout the year.

I believe the key here is to meditate on Christ coming again and that you are, at least symbolically, preparing for that day.

In a true sense, Advent is a season with a dual focus: the coming of Christ as a baby, and his coming again at a time we do not know. It's easy to get involved in the first and to exclude the second. Yet, you and I are called to focus on both. And it is up to us to do just that. Whatever helps us do that is what we ought to be about for the next four weeks.

For all of us it is important that we don't get so depressed by our gospel text that we lose sight that Jesus often surprises us with a story or a teaching that is unsettling. And yet he does so for a purpose, a reason. Here he wants us to be prepared for his coming again, and for that to be something that we look forward to, that we celebrate just as we prepare for his birth into a troubled world.

Finally, I'll ask you to celebrate his second coming by continuing to sing with gusto our hymns for today. Each one looks forward to Jesus' return with joyful anticipation. May each of us do so always.

Thanks be to God. Amen