

Wesley United Methodist Church  
November 27, 2016  
First Sunday in Advent  
Text: Romans 13:11-14  
Matthew 3:1-12  
Title: Sacred Time

Today is the first Sunday in Advent – the four weeks leading up to Christmas. In the Church, it is a time of preparation and anticipation, a time of preparing for and anticipating the ways that Christ comes into our lives. As a child, I sometimes wondered why we were always acting like it was a big surprise that Jesus was born at Christmas. We already knew that was what happened. Of course, that didn't stop me from getting excited about Santa Claus coming – and I already knew that he was coming too. As I got older, I began to understand that it wasn't that Jesus' birth was a surprise each year, but rather that remembering Jesus' birth was a really good way to remind ourselves of so many things that are easy to forget.

Later, I also understood that during Advent, we anticipate Christ's coming again, in that time when history will be fulfilled. Every time we celebrate communion, we affirm, "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." But truthfully, I don't think that many of us spend a lot of time talking about or thinking about that time when Jesus said he would return and that we must be ready, because no one knows the day or the hour. The early followers of Jesus believed that he would return during their lifetime. Every so often we hear of some group that thinks they have figured out when he will return, but then the date passes with nothing happening. Nearly 2,000 years later most of us are not holding our breath waiting and in many of our mainline churches we almost never talk about Jesus coming again.

Paul originally was among those who thought Jesus would return any day and we needed to live in anticipation and preparation. As the years went by, he came to understand that the anticipation was not so much about circling a date on the calendar as it was about hope. For me, that is what Advent is about. It is remembering that Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection are about God's promise that life, love, and wholeness are stronger than brokenness, hatred, and death. Advent is a reminder that God can be trusted to do what God has promised. Advent is a time when we wake up and look forward to Jesus entering our life in new and unexpected ways right in the here and now – in our daily lives.

Advent becomes a challenge for us because the world outside of these doors doesn't think about Advent, it thinks about Christmas and has been thinking about it for a while now. Let's be honest, so have we. We just had our Christmas on the Hill Bazaar. Many of us, myself included, have started our Christmas shopping. We hear Christmas songs wherever we go and we will be celebrating at parties and gatherings for the next few weeks.

As the beginning of our worship reminded us, this is a time when the sacred and the secular are often seen to be filled with conflicting messages. Each year I make myself the same promise. I promise that I will be focused on what Christmas is really about. I will enjoy Santa Claus with my grandchildren. I will sing Christmas music, decorate, and watch Christmas movies on the Hallmark channel, but I will not get so busy and stressed that I forget that Christmas is really about Jesus and about God's incredibly amazing love for us. Some years I do better at this than others, but each year I make that promise to myself and to God and I imagine God

smiling and saying, “Yes, Beverly, I hear you, I will help you, and I will always love you.”

I was reading an introduction to an Advent study called “Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam” by James Moore. What he wrote really spoke to me. He began by writing, “Let’s admit it: Christmas for many people means uproar, busyness, and wild confusion. It is absolute bedlam! Frayed nerves, emotional tensions, physical exhaustion, unpaid bills, long lines, traffic jams, difficult decisions, and hectic schedules all combine to make the Christmas season a time of busy confusion for many people. How many times ... will we hear people say, ‘If we can just get through Christmas...?’” I can identify with that, can you?

He continues with this story, “On the day before Christmas, one family was at wits’ end. The father and mother were frazzled from too much work and too many bills. They were on the verge of nervous breakdowns. Their young daughter felt like she was in the way. They had fussed at her and at each other all day long. We can almost understand why, with the frustrations of the day weighing down upon her, the little girl got her words mixed up in her bedtime prayer and said, ‘Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our Christmases, as we forgive those who Christmas against us.’”

Moore then asks, “Christmas or confusion, Bethlehem or bedlam: Which will you choose this year? The truth is, we don’t have to choose because Christmas always happens right in the midst of our confusion. God breaks into our confusion and becomes known through Jesus Christ. Christmas and confusion: Weren’t they intimately related at the first Christmas when Jesus was born? Sometimes we forget that. ... Christ

breaks into our chaos and confusion to bring Christmas and ... Bethlehem always happens in the midst of bedlam.”

As we enter this Advent season, I invite us in the spirit of Paul’s letter to the Romans to wake up, to be aware that every moment of time is rich with divine possibility. This includes all of those times that we think of as “church” times but it also includes every moment of every day, the times when we are caught in traffic, standing in long lines, reading or listening to the news, making long lists, spending money, cooking, eating, laughing, and crying.

We worship a God who became flesh and “moved into the neighborhood” not into a palace. We worship a God who came to us as a vulnerable baby born to a teenager not to a well-established stable married couple. We worship Jesus whose adult presence was heralded by a wild looking man in the wilderness wearing clothing made from camel’s hair tied with a leather belt as the prophet Elijah had so many years earlier not by a priest or pastor wearing appropriate church garb. Jesus’ presence was announced by John the Baptist who ate locusts and wild honey and when he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming – the good religious people – he called them a brood of vipers, snakes, warning them to repent of their sins and to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Jesus has always come in the strangest places and at the most unexpected times and that is still true today.

However, we do need to listen to John the Baptist even if initially we don’t like what he said. Nobody wants to be called a hypocrite or to be lectured at or judged harshly. But still there is something both in what John is saying and in what Paul is writing to the Romans. Both John and Paul

are telling us important things about how we should be living our lives as followers of Jesus.

John warns us to repent, to turn away from those things that separate us from God and to bear fruit that is worthy of that repentance or turning around. John is telling us that we need to be changed from the inside out – that our lives should reflect Jesus really living within us. Paul says almost the same thing. Paul reminds us, using Peterson’s translation of The Message, “Make sure you don’t get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. ... Dress yourself in Christ and be up and about!”

This is not about God’s judgment, but rather, a reminder that even as we are cherished and loved by God, we are also responsible for what we do. That can be good news for us, because love without expectations sometimes doesn’t really look like love at all. As parents or grandparents, we love our children and our grandchildren, and because we love them we teach them how they are supposed to behave, how they are to live. We do not allow our children or those we truly love to just live anyway they want and do whatever they want. We love them enough to teach them the importance of being kind to others, of living in harmony with others, of taking care of those who need help, of listening to others. We teach them what is expected of them and hold them responsible for their actions. That is what John and Paul are telling us. God does have expectations about how we are going to live, how we are going to treat others and God loves us enough to expect us to be responsible for our actions. God wants to transform us into people who really are in Christ’s image – people who take

what we have learned and what we believe seriously and live it out on a daily basis.

The rest of the Good news is that when our children mess up, when they do what they aren't supposed to do, we still love them, we forgive them, and we encourage them to try again. God does the same thing. When we mess up, when we do what we aren't supposed to do, God still loves us, God forgives us, God encourages us to try again and continues to transform us into the people that we were created to be, people made in the image of God, filled with the love of God and eager to live so that others will know and experience that love.

During this Advent season, the challenge for us is to see all of the times available to us, all of the now moments, and all of the future moments as times that are rich with the possibilities of God.

On Good Friday, my granddaughter and I went to see a movie. As we left the movie we talked about what we had liked the most. I was stunned to listen to her talk about the places where she saw God in that movie. That is allowing all of our "nows" to be rich with the possibilities of God.

During this Advent season, I pray that we will be open to the sacred around us. I pray that we will see the gift of the "now", each moment of our lives as a gift of sacred time and that we will use that sacred time as time to be with God, as time to be with family and friends, and as time to help those in need. One of the ways that we are invited to do that this year is to make use of a different kind of Advent Calendar. This one isn't written anywhere. It simply involves taking a box and each day of Advent, giving thanks to God for all that we have, and putting something in that box that will then be given to the Food Pantry or to another charity or worthy cause

if that is your choice. It is a time, to remind ourselves that all of our moments are sacred and belong to God. Our times of shopping, decorating, eating, partying, waiting, watching, preparing, rejoicing, are all times made richer and fuller when we are open to and look for the sacred in our everyday lives.