

"Advent Danger"

Mark 13:24-37

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The First Sunday of Advent

Prayer: Guide us O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom and in your will, discover peace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is a dangerous time of year. I recently read about the dangers associated with the holiday season. The article said that children in particular suffer more mouth, teeth and lip injuries this time of year than at any other, due to injuries that occur while trying out new presents such as skateboards, roller blades and bikes. It also warned that adults too suffer a higher percentage of injuries this time of year due to mishaps with Christmas trees, outdoor lights and power tools. And all of this even before you drop the turkey into the deep fryer and burn down your back deck.

Then consider the seasonal stress and strain—the anxiety many people experience, not to mention the financial pressure over the next four weeks to spend money at an alarming rate, which only adds to their already high credit card debt, and it's not surprising that this time of year also sees an increase in depression rates as well.

Beware, we are entering into a dangerous time of year.

Perhaps that's exactly the reason we need the season of Advent. Perhaps if we pause on this first Sunday of Advent, as well as again each Sunday over the next four weeks, and catch our breath and watch and listen, we might be able to relax a bit and actually allow the season to unfold around us rather than frantically trying to force the issue and make it happen. That is my hope and prayer at least, not only for myself but also for you.

Today we begin the season of Advent, which I think is one of the loveliest and also one of the "churchiest" times in the liturgical year. We know full well how Christmas is celebrated for better or worse, and most often it seems, for the worse. We all know how even non Christians celebrate Easter with eggs and bunnies and its proximity to pagan festivals of fertility and the regeneration of the earth as spring is ushered in after a long winter. And as Godly a theme as giving thanks may be, Thanksgiving is nevertheless a national holiday that the church embraces because it blends nicely with one of Christianity's major themes.

But Advent is altogether different. Advent is decidedly counter-cultural. It's themes of quiet reflection and waiting run counter to the cultural and certainly to the commercial themes of the season which tell us a hurry up because we only have so much time left to get our shopping done.

And we're not very good at waiting even though it's what we spend most of our life doing, when you think about it. We wait until the day when we can get our driver's license and we wait in doctors' offices, we wait for airplanes and for love to come our way. We wait for peace to arrive and for our fears to be calmed. We wait for the truth to come out and for justice to be ushered in so that the world looks different than we've known it.

Sometimes we wait for food as well as for the deep hungering in our souls to be satisfied. We wait for our children to be conceived and then for them to be born. We wait for them to grow up and then we wait for them to call home and tell us they are ok. Waiting is how we spend a significant portion of our lives and ironically, we're not very good at it.

A few years ago on a Saturday before Christmas, I took my life into my own hands by venturing into the Disney Store. It was total chaos. It was crowded and loud, tired kids were screaming and parents looked spent in every way. Music was blaring and the young, clean cut staff in their Mousketeer sweaters looked way too chipper. Over in the corner of that crowded store curled up on the floor and sound asleep in the fetal position, was a small child. It was as if he'd gone until he hit the wall and he just couldn't go anymore so he crashed right there in the midst of the chaos.

Well, today's text tells us to keep awake but that also means keeping awake by tuning the extraneous noise out so we are better able to pay attention. That little guy sleeping on the floor of the Disney Store was paying attention to his body that badly needed sleep and so he tuned out everything else and simply crashed while his mother decided what to buy.

This season is known for its noise and its busyness and sometimes, it can be overwhelming. It's one of the reasons I love our opening hymn today on this first Sunday of Advent, "Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and in fear and trembling stand...."

Keeping silent and standing in fear and trembling may not be the message out at the Mall of America, but it is not a bad way to begin our annual journey toward Christmas. In fact, I would argue that it's an altogether appropriate way to begin because whether we like it or not, or whether or not it's the way we would have constructed the liturgical year, Advent begins on the rather somber notes of great urgency and longing rather than joy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned and murdered by the Nazis once said, "God's coming is not only a matter of glad tidings but is first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience." What makes it so frightening?

It's frightening because Christ's coming has uncovered the world's sin and dark places. And it's frightening, I suppose, because in that manger will lie *not* just a child whose birth we celebrate, but a child who will grow and live to die. And it's frightening in a way because we hang our faith and our hope on the belief that this child is who we believe him to be, namely the Prince of Peace and the source of our salvation. So it is sometimes frightening because we dare to believe that out of the tragedy that was his death comes new life and eternal hope for us and for the world.

As if we could somehow be unaware of it, our world is in a terrible mess. Uncertainly about the future is running high and we desperately need light to shine into our darkness. And these ominous sounding texts let us know how precarious the situation is. This section of Mark's Gospel has been called the "Little Apocalypse" because of its talk about the end of the world. But speculation about the end of the world wasn't unique to Mark's day. Every generation has had its would be sages and prognosticators. And many think that Mark's admonition to watch and keep alert served as a kind of corrective to those who had it all figured out—those who thought they knew the exact time and place it would happen, as well as what it would look like when God finally intervened and redeemed creation.

Mark says, "Keep awake. Keep watching. Because you do not know when and you certainly don't know how it will look when it happens."

No one expected the Messiah to come in the form of an infant and so many failed to see it when it happened that way. So what could possibly be the danger inherent in Advent? Namely that we too will miss it. That we too, who know the one we're looking for, could easily be swept along in the "spirit" of the season, which is not at all the spirit the season intends. That its message would be overwhelmed by other noises, or that in our eagerness to get to the day we might rush through the important season of preparation. Because Advent is about subtlety and that always requires that we pay careful attention.

And so we need to be alert and to pay attention because this season invites us to consider some remarkable—almost unbelievable things. Advent invited us to consider how the cries of that baby in a manger would in time come to embody the cries of every longing human heart, including your own. It invites us to consider how in spite of the vulnerability of that baby, a power has nonetheless been unleashed in the world that has and continues to transform it like no other.

Advent invites us to consider what we know to be true but sometimes have a hard time clinging to, namely how good ultimately triumphs over the evil that sometimes seems to dominate the landscape

and headlines, as well as how there isn't a darkness dark enough that even a single ray of light cannot pierce it and cause it to retreat.

I love the season of Advent because it seems to address us where we are. Because in so many ways, we are anxious people these days. We are fearful for our world and for the future of our children and we are desperately searching for hopeful signs that things will indeed get better. And many of us are tired of waiting. But that is the human predicament—that's what it is to live where we live.

It's the reason that before we can truly celebrate Christmas, we need the season of Advent. Because for some of you, the waiting has been long and frankly lonely, and you want desperately to see a light shining in your darkness. And for each of us, whoever you may be and in ways that perhaps only you know about yourself to be true, we are all waiting to be ransomed from our captivity.

Keep awake. Keep watching.

Amen.

