

First Sunday of Advent: Nov. 27, 2022

Lectionary Readings

- **First Reading** Isaiah 2:1-5
- **Psalm** 122:1-9
- **Second Reading** Romans 13:11-14*
- **Gospel** Matthew 24:36-44*

“Wake Up! The Alternative to Anxiety or Apathy”

When it comes to hosting people at home for the holidays, most of us fall into one of two camps:

1. Those who are meticulously preparing every last detail, wanting everything to look and feel and be perfect. We say it’s because we have a love for the season and a dedication to excellence, but the truth for many of us is that we’re fueled by the anxiety of avoiding a burnt edge on the pie, a small wrinkle on the wrapping paper, or the one strand of bulbs which should be twinkling but isn’t.
2. Those who know that Christmas is always a mess, so we’re apathetic about it all. We’ll do what we have to do, but we don’t expect anything great to happen. What we look forward to is that it will soon be over and we can get back to not having to do anything extra.

Today’s New Testament texts witness to feelings of both anxiety and apathy. These scriptures do not speak of the first coming of Jesus, the birth of Christ. Rather, they speak of the second coming, the *parousia*.

The idea of Christ’s second coming can cause anxiety: when Jesus returns, will we have done enough to be saved, to be “taken up” by Jesus, to experience the fullness of eternity in God’s kingdom? Do we know enough? Have we figured out all the mysteries of God? Have we proved ourselves worthy?

Alternatively, these scriptures about the second coming might give us an excuse for being apathetic about matters of faith. Since we don’t know anything about the day or time of judgment, why should we worry? Let the chips fall where they may, and don’t concern yourself with salvation. Just live for the moment: eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow we die, right?

Upon closer inspection, these texts call us to neither anxiety nor apathy. Rather, they call us to a spirit of wakefulness or attentiveness to the nearness of salvation. The season of Advent is a time to help us faithfully anticipate the arrival of Christ, both as the Christ child *and* as the returning Messiah who ushers us into the fulfilled kingdom. Rather than being anxious about whether we’ve done enough, or apathetic in the face of unknown and unachievable standards, our call in this season is to keep awake with faithful anticipation of the joy that will come knocking on our door—though we know not when.

Far from scaring us into toeing the line of faith, Advent invites us into an acceptance that we are already God’s people before we hang the first garland or wreath. As we look back at God’s mighty acts of salvation, and look forward to the new heaven and new earth, we are assured that this present in-between time of waiting is just as equally blessed as the past and future.

That assurance frees us from the anxiety of celebrating Christmas correctly and perfectly. We can’t produce the perfect holiday, though that may not stop the perfectionists among us from trying. Assurance found in God’s promise means that we don’t have to orchestrate magical moments, give the greatest gift, or make the season meaningful, because God has already done these things. Nothing we say or do can add to or take away from the power of Christ’s arrival.

It's a relief that Christ doesn't expect us to know everything, least of all the estimated time of arrival at the end of days. Even the most faithful people—even Jesus himself—do not always know what God is up to.

Yet we also must be careful not to let our freedom from anxiety push us too far in the other direction, toward the apathy that lets us wander aimlessly wander through the season with no expectation that God will come at all. We are expected to do *something* with this time of Advent.

So that's the invitation the preacher can give for this season: to invite hearers to spend each day of Advent in watchful living. To be awake and stay awake. To peer attentively through the lenses of each ordinary day, anticipating that something extraordinary is on its way.

Second Sunday of Advent: Dec. 4, 2022

Lectionary Readings

- **First Reading** [Isaiah 11:1-10](#)
- **Psalm** [72:1-7, 18-19](#)
- **Second Reading** [Romans 15:4-13](#)
- **Gospel** [Matthew 3:1-12*](#)

“More than Window Dressing: How to Heed the Wild Call of John the Baptist”

John the Baptist’s intense, serious message always feels out of place in December, where preparing for Christmas can sweep us up into decorations, bubbly holiday tunes, and gazing at an abundance of material goods we might buy. If we’re lucky, these things will evoke in us a sense of magic, wonder, and feelings of good will. That’s all we want for Christmas!

But part of the love that Christmas ushers in is a “tough love.” Christ’s birth demands that we fully examine our words and actions; that we change our hearts and lives from the inside out. No matter how many pretty decorations we hang in the window, no matter how generous we are with giving gifts and donating to charities, no matter how many extra worship services we attend, if Christmas doesn’t inspire a lasting change in us, it will be nothing more than window dressing. God’s love at Christmas comes with demands attached for those who will accept it.

This message was not directed to the crowd in general, but to the Pharisees and Sadducees in particular. Both were Jewish sects that valued a legalistic way of looking at scripture and religion. Their introduction here as opponents of John sets the scene for their repeated conflicts with Jesus throughout the rest of Matthew’s Gospel. These were people who cultivated an image of holiness, but were lacking in substance. They were so caught up in religious rules and laws that they often lacked compassion for the people who hadn’t been brought up that way, or who didn’t fit the social mores the religious folks valued.

John the Baptist sees through their facade. They have come to receive the ritual of baptism, not because they feel any need for it, but because they know it will make them appear more holy to others. The Pharisees and Sadducees seem convinced that they have figured everything out already, and they certainly don’t need a wilderness prophet to lecture them. But they do want people to see how special and holy they already are.

The encounter reminds me of one of John Wesley’s most famous sermons, “The Almost Christian.” In it, he makes a distinction between the *Almost* Christian and the *Altogether* Christian. The Almost Christian avoids cursing, drunkenness, adultery, gossiping, and fighting. The Almost Christian avoids doing evil of any kind. The Almost Christian does many good things too: working hard, reproofing the wicked, comforting the afflicted, worshiping earnestly and attentively, praying continually at home, being generous, and treating others with kindness and compassion at all times.

But the Altogether Christian is one whose life also bears fruit which shows a change of heart and life. The Altogether Christian goes beyond simple avoidance of evil and practice of good; reaching so far as to love God with all of their being, all of their actions, all of themselves.

John the Baptist reminds us that God not only cares about what we believe, but also cares about how we live our lives. David Bartlett puts it this way:

If God does not care what I do, I will begin to suspect that God does not actually care about me. If God loves me enough to welcome me into Christ’s family, then God loves

me enough to expect something of me. (What God expects, it need hardly be said, is not necessarily what churches that specialize in judgment expect.)¹

Most of the people coming to John the Baptist for baptism probably don't have a deep understanding of the doctrine of sin. All they have is the experience of sin and the desire to be rid of it. I imagine that, like us, they know that they can be their own worst enemies, continually unable to get out of their own way. The people asking for baptism by John have the self-awareness to recognize the things in need of changing in their lives, and the humility to recognize that change can't happen without first receiving this Christ, this Savior, who has broken into their world.

Unless we surrender ourselves this season to a radical trust in God to reshape and realign us as people worthy of the kingdom, then it all will be a waste of time. It will be a great and entertaining show, but by Epiphany it will be packed up in boxes once again. We'll be trees that bear no fruit, good people who are *almost* Christians but not fully in love with the Lord. And like the inn that had no room for Mary and Joseph, God will find our hearts and our congregations filled to capacity and unable to receive the kingdom of heaven that's coming.

There's still time for Christmas to change our hearts and lives. But it will require no less than a complete and total surrender to the God who desires to dwell in us and make us worthy of the Savior. Don't delay! "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!"

¹ Bartlett, David, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

Third Sunday of Advent: Dec. 11, 2022

Lectionary Readings

- **First Reading** [Isaiah 35:1-10](#)
- **Psalm** [146:5-10](#)
- **or alternate reading** [Luke 1:47-55*](#)
- **Second Reading** [James 5:7-10](#)
- **Gospel** [Matthew 11:2-11](#)

“Blessed As You Are: What Mary’s Call Story Teaches Us”

*“He knows if you’ve been bad or good,
so be good for goodness sake!”*

Some days it’s hard to tell if there’s a difference between Santa Claus and God. To hear many people describe God’s blessing, one might think that only those who keep themselves on the nice list will receive the gift of Jesus at Christmas. *If you do the right things, if you attend worship, if you avoid swearing, if you pray the right prayer, if you turn your life over to Jesus, if you send money in the mail to the TV preacher, then you will receive God’s blessing and favor.*

But that’s not the story of Mary, mother of Jesus. As far as we can tell, Mary did nothing to earn God’s blessing and favor. She did nothing to prove that she was worthy of the monumental task of carrying the Christ child. This whole story flies in the face of the belief that God’s blessing or favor is conditional upon our worthiness or behavior or status. Mary is declared favored at the beginning of the story, before she says or does anything—before she even accepts the responsibility of birthing Christ.

This is a revolutionary way of thinking. Here is an essential task of the kingdom of God, and it’s given to someone with absolutely no status or privilege: a peasant teenage woman. That’s intentional, I believe, to remind us that God often uses the most unlikely characters to carry out divine purposes. And more specifically to this story, it teaches us that blessing and favor is bestowed, not earned.

But what a strange thing to say, isn’t it? Mary is given this monumental task. The child she carries in her womb changes human-divine relations forever. The Christ she gives birth to is the one who will save us. And she must do all of this as a poor, unwed teenager, which means she probably won’t get much help or support along the way.

Yet Mary rejoices in her task, understanding it to be a sign of blessing and favor that God is using her to bring forth the kingdom. And she was right! To this day she is still called *blessed*, because she was and is and always will be. But she knows—and testifies—to the reality that her blessedness is purely because of what God is doing for her and within her. It’s nothing she’s earned or achieved for herself.

I think all of us at some point have felt as if we weren’t deserving of blessing or favor - maybe because we received something we didn’t feel we deserved, or because we didn’t receive the love and affirmation that all people deserve.

Unfortunately, some people are made to feel this way every day. The world tells people the lie of conditional love. *If you act a certain way, believe a particular thing, wear the right clothes, join the crowd, are able-bodied and productive, and earn a college degree to hang on your wall . . . if you do all the right things, then the world will deem you worthy of blessing and favor.*

But God’s blessing and favor is bestowed, not earned. And it’s not a limited resource either. The God we worship shares blessing and favor liberally. By that I mean that the sharing of God’s blessing

with new people does not threaten our own blessedness. To call others blessed does not mean that we are not. God's blessing and favor is meant to be shared freely and widely with all people.

What might it mean to acknowledge that all people are blessed, not because of anything we've done, earned, or received, but because of what *God* is doing in us? And what might it mean to declare that not only for ourselves, but for others too? Nadia Bolz-Weber says, "Mary is what it looks like to believe that we already are who God says we are."²

To live as people who are blessed and favored by God is to receive this gift at Christmas. It is also to hold on to that gift after the holidays are over. It is to live each day believing that all people are worthy of God's blessing; that every person we meet is desperate to hear words of blessing and favor from God. Like Mary, each of us has the responsibility—and the joy—to give birth to God's message of blessing and favor to the world.

² Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016).

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Dec. 18, 2022

Lectionary Readings

- **First Reading** [Isaiah 7:10-16*](#)
- **Psalm** [80:1-7, 17-19](#)
- **Second Reading** [Romans 1:1-7](#)
- **Gospel** [Matthew 1:18-25*](#)

“More Than Expected: Remaining Attentive To All That God Brings”

The parallels between today’s First Reading and Gospel Reading are hard to ignore. In both there’s a promise of a young woman giving birth to Immanuel, *God with us*, and that child’s birth is meant to be a symbol of hope. More subtly is that the main character in each text—King Ahaz in Isaiah and Joseph in Matthew—is facing a difficult moral decision. Both characters receive instruction from the Lord. But their responses could not be more different.

For King Ahaz, mired in war between the Northern and Southern Kingdom, God’s offer of assistance is rebuffed. Having already brokered a deal with the Assyrians—which includes accepting Assyrian religious rituals and beliefs—Ahaz seems confident in his own morally suspect plans. “I will not put the Lord to the test,” he says, in what sounds as pious as if Jesus himself would say it—and he did. But Jesus said it to Satan. Ahaz says it to the Lord, who isn’t testing him but is inviting him to trust in the Lord rather than his own plans.

Joseph is also in a quandary. Mary is pregnant, and Joseph is not the father. The only righteous and just decision, and the legally required decision, is to divorce her. But he chooses against one thing the law allows, even encourages: publicly humiliating Mary. Joseph believes in following the religious laws. But he also has compassion for the woman he still loves.

Life’s decisions are not always easy. The righteous way isn’t always clear. The world is full of moral ambiguities and challenges, and of temptations to trust in our own solutions to the problems before us. But in a difficult moral situation, Joseph hears the voice of God, and discovers a greater righteousness and justice beyond simple following of the religious law. He sees a way forward not previously imagined. He is invited to trust in God.

Ahaz had the same invitation, but chose to go his own way. His situation is much like ours today: deep divisions between “warring kingdoms” both trying to occupy the same region. Here he is, working hard to solve the problem, and God invites him to lay aside his plans and solutions for deeper trust in the Lord’s ability to save.

The blessings of Christmas aren’t given because they’re asked or begged for. God doesn’t always show up because we’re looking for a sign. Sometimes God shows up after we think we’ve already found the solution; after we make an ally to win the war like Ahaz; after we’ve decided to follow the law and be compassionate just as the righteous Joseph.

The blessing of Christmas—the arrival of Emmanuel, God with us—is given as an invitation to trust in the Lord to handle all our moral quandaries, family concerns, and divided kingdoms. It’s a reminder that we’re constantly searching for signs that God can be trusted. Celeste Kennel-Shank writes:

We all place our hopes in the same God, however different those hopes might be. We all call on the same God to save us, however differently we might envision salvation. We all want God's face to shine on us, that we may be restored.³

So the question to ponder these final days of Christmas is this: faced with moral quandaries and deep divisions and questions of religious devotion, how will we respond with complete and total trust in the living God who comes to live among us? How will we accept the invitation to let the Lord show up unexpectedly, offering salvation to all who will receive it, if only we will remain open to setting aside what we've already planned?

What might Christmas look like for the person who, like Joseph, remains attentive to the Lord's voice and follows the instructions given, not only until the sign is given and the child is born, but after that as well? Let us ponder these things as we take those final steps to the manger this week.

³ "God's Face Shines (Isaiah 7:10–16; Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19)." *The Christian Century*, www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/gods-face-shines-isaiah-710-16-psalm-801-7-17-19. Accessed 3 Aug. 2022.

Christmas Eve: Dec. 24, 2022

Lectionary Readings

- **First Reading** Isaiah 9:2-7
- **Psalm** 96:1-13
- **Second Reading** Titus 2:11-14
- **Gospel** Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)*

“Ready or Not: Standing at the Threshold”⁴

Welcome to the main event. This is the moment we’ve spent all month preparing and waiting for, and it’s finally here.

This moment is like so many others in our lives: that point when all our preparation coalesces into the heart-skipping, butterflies-in-the-stomach, goosebumps-on-the-arms feeling at the moment of truth. You know: that feeling athletes get just before taking the field for the big game. That pregnant pause as the conductor lifts their hands and everything is dead silent before the music begins. Christmas Eve is the deep breath you take before you give a work presentation, sing a solo, or begin preaching. The waiting is over and there’s nothing more you can do to prepare. All that’s left to do is take the field, the stage, the mic, the pulpit, and pray that you’re ready.

So, how do you feel? Do you feel ready for Christmas? Some of us have been ready for days. The cards were sent weeks ago, the gifts are already wrapped and under the tree, and the house is prepared for the guests. We just can’t wait to get this party started already! Enough with the suspense - let’s go!

But some of us still need more time. We were slow in getting the gifts, and some are now sentenced to shipping purgatory until after the feast day. Sure, it’s Christmas Eve, but we’re only halfway ready for it: The cards are half-done, the decorations are half-up, the cookies are half-baked.

But that’s the good thing about absolute deadlines. Sometimes we just have to submit our work even if we’re not quite ready to. Christmas can be like that. We spend all month working hard to make the perfect Christmas happen, but by the time the clock runs out on De. 24 all we can do is take a deep breath and step onto the stage of Christmas, whether or not we are ready for it.

So here we stand, on the threshold of Christmas celebrations. And whether you’ve been ready for this all week or you’re still distracted by all that’s left undone, we all turn the page from Advent to Christmas, from waiting and preparing to fulfillment and celebration. Ready or not, here Jesus comes, fully incarnated into our world as the light and life for all people.

That’s the best part about Christmas. Here we’ve spent all month busying ourselves with the tasks of the season, and in the end we come to find out none of it has any bearing on whether or not Christ comes at Christmas. Jesus is a gift, not a reward, so it doesn’t matter whether or not we’ve done enough to prepare. We don’t *earn* Christmas or the Savior who is born on this night. We *receive* Christmas; we receive the gift of the Christ child.

In Christmas, God is saying, “I have chosen to live among you. And it makes no difference if you’ve made enough room, or prepared properly, or been naughty or nice all year. My gift to you is grace

⁴ This meditation was inspired by chapter 16 of Susan Swetnam’s book, *A Season of Little Sacraments: Christmas Commotion, Advent Grace* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016).

you don't deserve, love that isn't earned. I give myself to you, freely and openly, and all that's required of you is that you open your hearts and lives to receive that gift."

That doesn't negate all our preparations this month. It is still good for us to "prepare him room" and to follow John the Baptizer's admonition to change our hearts and lives as a means to prepare the way of the Lord. But the significance of all this work pales in comparison to the grace of God we receive on this holy night. Tonight we release ourselves from this preparatory work so that we may turn instead to Mary's refrain: "Let it be with me according to your word."

Those words hang in the air as we stand as athletes on the edge of the field, as actors listening intently for our cue, as hosts and hostesses watching guests pull into the driveway, as parents and grandparents releasing the children to open gifts, and as congregants looking at watches hoping the preacher will soon wrap up the sermon so candles can be lit and "Silent Night" can be sung.

Regardless of how prepared you feel, the beauty of Christmas Eve is that there is nothing left to do but worship: with your ears as you listen to God's story, with your mouth as you sing glory to God in the highest, with your hands that offer gifts of gratitude, and with your eyes that see the candles flickering with hope that beats back the darkness. Come and worship Christ, the newborn king. Because ready or not, here he comes!